BURTON OF THE FLYING CORPS

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THROUGH THE SKYLIGHT. See page 22.

BURTON OF THE FLYING CORPS

BY

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Chapter I Heading

DÉFENSE DE FUMER

I

About one o'clock one Saturday afternoon in summer, a hydro-aeroplane--or, as its owner preferred to call it, a flying-boat--dropped lightly on to the surface of one of the many creeks that intersect the marshes bordering on the river Swale. The pilot, a youth of perhaps twenty years, having moored his vessel to a stake in the bank, leapt ashore with a light suit-case, and walked rapidly along a cinder path towards the low wooden shed, painted black, that broke the level a few hundred yards away.

It was a lonely spot--the very image of dreariness. All around extended the "glooming flats"; between the shed and Luddenham Church, a mile or so distant, nothing varied the grey monotony except an occasional tree, and a small red-brick, red-tiled cottage, which, with its flower-filled windows, seemed oddly out of place amid its surroundings--an oasis in a desert.

The youth, clad in khaki-coloured overalls and a pilot's cap, made straight for the open door of the shed. There he set his suit-case on the ground, and stepping in, recoiled before the acrid smell that saluted his nostrils. He gave a little cough, but the man stooping over a bench that ran along one of the walls neither looked up, nor in any way signified that he was aware of a visitor. He was a tall, fair man, spectacled, slightly bald, clean shaven, dressed in garments apparently of india-rubber. The bench was covered with crucibles, retorts, blow-pipes, test tubes, Bunsen burners, and sundry other pieces of scientific apparatus, and on the shelf above it stood an array of glass bottles and porcelain jars. It was into such a jar that the man was now gazing.

"Hullo, Pickles!" said the newcomer, coughing again. "What a frightful stink!"

The man lifted his head, looked vacantly through his spectacles for a moment, then bent again over the jar, from which he took a small portion of a yellowish substance on the end of a scalpel. Placing this in a glass bowl, he poured on it a little liquid from one of the glass bottles, stirred it with a glass rod, and watched. A smell of ammonia combined with decayed fish mingled with the other odours in the air, causing the visitor to choke again.

"Beautiful!" murmured the experimenter. He then poured some of the solution into another vessel and gazed at it with the rapt vision of an enthusiast.

Ted Burton leant against the doorpost. He knew that it was useless to interrupt his friend until the experiment was concluded. But becoming impatient as the minutes passed, he took out a cigarette, and was about to strike a match. Then, however, at a sudden recollection of his surroundings, he slipped out into the open air, taking great gulps as if to clear his throat of the sickening fumes, and proceeded to light his cigarette in ease of mind.

By and by a cheery voice hailed him from the interior.

"That you, Teddy?"

"If you've quite finished," said Burton, putting his head in at the door, after he had first flung away his half-smoked cigarette.

"Glad to see you, my dear fellow. I say, will you do something for me? You came in your machine, of course."

"Of course. What is it? It's about lunch-time, you know."

"Is it? But it won't take you long. I've run out of picric acid, and can't get on. Just fly over to Chatham, will you, and bring some back with you. You'll get it at Wells's in the High Street: you'll be there and back in half an hour or so."

"Can't you wait till after lunch?"

"Well, I can, but it will be a nuisance. You see, the whole experiment is hung up for want of the stuff."

"Oh, very well. By the way, you've done it at last, I see."

"Done what?"

"Pulled off the phenosulphonitro-something-or-other that you've been working at I don't know how long."

"How on earth did you know?" inquired his friend with an air of surprise and chagrin.

Burton pulled out a newspaper, unfolded it, and handed it over, pointing to a short paragraph.

We understand that a new high explosive of immense power, the invention of Dr. Bertram Micklewright, is about to be adopted for the British Navy. Dr. Micklewright has been for some years engaged in perfecting his discovery, and after prolonged experimentation has succeeded in rendering his explosive stable.

"Well, I'm hanged!" cried Micklewright, frowning with annoyance. "The Admiralty swore me to secrecy, and now they've let the cat out of the bag. Some confounded whipper-snapper of a clerk, I suppose, who's got a journalist brother."

"It's true, then?"

"Yes, by Jove, it's true! Look, here's the stuff; licks lyddite hollow."

He took some yellowish crystals from a porcelain bath and displayed them with the pride of an inventor.

"I say, Pickles, is it safe?" said Burton, backing as the chemist held the stuff up for his inspection.

"Perfectly," said Micklewright with a smile. "It's more difficult even than lyddite to detonate, and it'll burn without exploding. Look here!"

He put a small quantity into a zinc pan, lit a match, and applied it. A column of suffocating smoke rose swiftly to the roof. Burton spluttered.

"Beautiful!" he gasped ironically. "I'm glad, old man; your fortune's made now, I suppose. But I can't say I like the stink. Takes your appetite away, don't it?"

"Ah! You mentioned lunch. Just get me that stuff like a good fellow; then I'll prepare my solution; and then we'll have lunch and you can dispose of me as you please."

II

Burton returned to the creek, boarded his flying-boat, and was soon skimming across country on the fifteen-mile flight to Chatham.

He had been Micklewright's fag at school, and the two had remained close friends ever since. Micklewright, after carrying all before him at Cambridge, devoted himself to research, and particularly to the study of explosives. To avoid the risk of shattering a neighbourhood, he had built his laboratory on the Luddenham Marshes, putting up the picturesque little cottage close at hand for his residence. There he lived attended only by an old woman, who often assured him that no one else would be content to stay in so dreary a spot. He had wished Burton, when he left school, to join him as assistant: but the younger fellow had no love for "stinks," and threw in his lot with a firm of aeroplane builders. Their factory being on the Isle of Sheppey, within a few miles of Micklewright's laboratory, the two friends saw each other pretty frequently; and when Burton started a flying-boat of his own, he often invited himself to spend a week-end with Micklewright, and took him for long flights for the good of his health, as he said: "an antidote to your poisonous stenches, old man."

Burton was so much accustomed to voyage in the air that he had ceased to pay much attention to the ordinary scenes on the earth beneath him. But he had completed nearly a third of his course when his eye was momentarily arrested by the sight of two motor-cycles, rapidly crossing the railway bridge at Snipeshill. To one of them was attached a side car, apparently occupied. Motor-cycles were frequently to be seen along the Canterbury road, but Burton was struck with a passing wonder that these cyclists had quitted the highway, and were careering along a road that led to no place of either interest or importance. If they were exploring they would soon realise that they had wasted their time, for the by-road rejoined the main road a few miles further east.

On arriving at Chatham, Burton did not descend near the cemetery, as he might have done with his landing chassis, but passed over the town and alighted in the Medway opposite the "Sun" pier. Thence he made his way to the address in the High Street given him by Micklewright. He was annoyed when he found the place closed.

"Just like old Pickles!" he thought. "He forgot it's Saturday." But, loth to have made his journey for nothing, he inquired for the private residence of the proprietor of the store, and luckily finding him at home, made known the object of his visit.

"I'm sorry I shall have to ask you to wait, sir," said the man. "The place is locked up, as you saw; my men have gone home, and I've an engagement that will keep me for an hour or so; perhaps I could send it over--some time this evening?"

"No, I'd better wait. Dr. Micklewright wants the stuff as soon as possible. When will it be ready?"

"If you'll be at the store at three o'clock I will have it ready packed."

It was now nearly two.

"No time to fly back to lunch and come again," thought Burton, as he departed. "I'll get something to eat at the 'Sun,' and ring old Pickles up and explain."

He made his way to the hotel, a little annoyed at wasting so fine an afternoon. Entering the telephone box he gave Micklewright's number and waited. Presently a girl's voice said--

"There's no reply. Shall I ring you off?"

"Oh! Try again, will you, please?"

Micklewright often took off the receiver in the laboratory, to avoid interruption during his experiments, and Burton supposed that such was the case now. He waited; a minute or two passed; then the girl's voice again--

"I can't put you on. There's something wrong with the line."

"Thank you very much," said Burton; he was always specially polite to the anonymous girls of the telephone exchange, because "they always sound so worried, poor things," as he said. "Bad luck all the time," he thought, as he hung up the receiver.

He passed to the coffee-room, ate a light lunch, smoked a cigarette, looked in at the billiard-room, and on the stroke of three reappeared at the chemist's store. In a few minutes he was provided with a package carefully wrapped, and by twenty minutes after the hour was soaring back to his friend's laboratory.

Alighting as before at the creek, he walked up the path. The door of the shed was locked. He rapped on it, but received no answer, and supposed that Micklewright had returned to the house, though he noticed with some surprise that his suit-case still stood where he had left it. He lifted it, went on to the cottage, and turned the handle of the front door. This also was locked. Feeling slightly irritated, Burton knocked more loudly. No one came to the door; there was not a sound from within. He knocked again; still without result. Leaving his suit-case on the doorstep, he went to the back, and tried the door on that side. It was locked.

"This is too bad," he thought. "Pickles is an absent-minded old buffer, but I never knew him so absolutely forgetful as this. Evidently he and the old woman are both out."

He returned to the front of the house, and seeing that the catch of one of the windows was not fastened, he threw up the lower sash, hoisted his suit-case over the sill, and himself dropped into the room. The table was laid for lunch, but nothing had been used.

"Rummy go!" said Burton to himself.

Conscious of a smell of burning, he crossed the passage, and glanced in at Micklewright's den, then at the kitchen, where the air was full of the fumes of

something scorching. A saucepan stood on the dying fire. Lifting the lid, he saw that it contained browned and blackened potatoes. He opened the oven door, and fell back before a cloud of smoke impregnated with the odour of burnt flesh.

"They must have been called away very suddenly," he thought. "Perhaps there's a telegram that explains it."

He was returning to his friend's room when he was suddenly arrested by a slight sound within the house.

"Who's there?" he called, going to the door.

From the upper floor came an indescribable sound. Now seriously alarmed, Burton sprang up the stairs and entered Micklewright's bedroom. It was empty and undisturbed. The spare room which he was himself to occupy was equally unremarkable. Once more he heard the sound: it came from the housekeeper's room.

"Are you there?" he called, listening at the closed door.

He flung it open at a repetition of the inarticulate sound. There, on the bed, lay the old housekeeper in a huddled heap, her hands and feet bound, and a towel tied over her head. This he removed in a moment.

[image]

"Oh, Mr. Burton, sir"

"Oh, Mr. Burton, sir, I'm so glad you've come," gasped the old woman; "oh, those awful men!"

"What has happened, Mrs. Jones?" cried Burton; "where's the doctor?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir. I'm all of a shake, and the mutton'll be burnt to a cinder."

"Never mind the mutton! Pull yourself together and tell me what happened."

He had cut the cords, and lifted her from the bed.

"Oh, it near killed me, it did. I was just come upstairs to put on a clean apron when I heard the door open, and some one went into the kitchen. I thought it was the doctor, and called out that I was coming. Next minute two men came rushing up, and before I knew where I was they smothered my head in the towel, and flung me on to the bed like a bundle and tied my hands and feet. It shook me all to pieces, sir."

Burton waited for no more, but leapt down the stairs, vaulted over the window sill, and rushed towards the laboratory, trembling with nameless fears. He tried to burst in the door, but it resisted all his strength. There were no windows in the walls; the place was lighted from above. Shinning up the drain-pipe, he

scrambled along the gutter until he could look through the skylight in the sloping roof. And then he saw Micklewright, with his back towards him, sitting rigid in a chair.

III

Burton drove his elbow through the skylight, swung himself through the hole, and dropped to the floor. To his great relief he saw that Micklewright was neither dead nor unconscious; indeed, his eyes were gazing placidly at him through his spectacles. It was the work of a moment to cut the cords that bound the chemist's legs and arms to the chair, and to tear from his mouth the thick fold of newspaper that had gagged him.

"Wood pulp!" said Micklewright, with a grimace of mild disgust, as soon as he could speak. "Beastly stuff!--if I've got to be gagged, gag me with rag!"

"Who did it? What's it mean?" said Burton.

"It means that somebody was keenly interested in that paragraph which the Admiralty clerk so kindly supplied to his journalist brother."

"The new explosive?"

"Yes. Competitors abhor a secret…. The taste of printer's ink on pulp paper is very obnoxious, Teddy."

"Hang the paper! Tell me what happened."

"It was very neatly done. As nearly as I can recollect, a man put his head in at the door and asked politely, but in broken English, the way to Faversham. Being rather busy at the time I'm afraid I misdirected him. But it didn't matter, because a second or two after I was kicking the shins of two other fellows who were hugging me; I'm sorry I had to use my boots, but my fists were not at the moment available. You see how it ended.

"They had just fixed me in the chair--printer's ink is *very* horrid--when the telephone bell rang. My first visitor told one of the others, in French, to cut the wire: it must have been rather annoying to the person at the other end."

"I was trying to get you in the 'Sun.' But go on."

"Their next movements much interested me. The commander of the expedition began to scout along the bench, and soon discovered my explosive--by the way, I proposed to call it Hittite. He was a cool card. He first burnt a little: 'Bien!' said he. Then he exploded a little: 'Bien!' again. Then he scooped the whole lot into a brown leather bag, just as it was, and made off, lifting his hat very politely as he went out. He had some trouble in getting his motor-cycle to fire----"

"They came on motor-cycles? I saw two crossing the railway at Snipeshill as I went. Look here, Pickles, this is serious, isn't it?"

"Well, of course any fool could make Hittite after a reputable chemist has analysed my stuff. I shall have to start again, I suppose."

"Great Scott! How can you take it so coolly? The ruffians have got to be caught. Can you describe them?"

"Luckily, they allowed me the use of my eyes, though I've heard of speaking eyes, haven't you? They were all foreigners. The commander was a big fellow, bald as an egg, with a natty little moustache, very urbane, well educated, to judge by his accent, though you can never tell with these foreigners. The others were bearded--quite uninteresting--chauffeurs or mechanics--men of that stamp. Their boss was a personality."

"He spoke French?"

"Yes. You brought that picric acid, Teddy?"

"It's in the house. By the way, they gagged Mrs. Jones too."

"Not with a newspaper, I hope. I'm afraid the poor old thing will give me notice. We had better go and console her."

They mounted on the bench, clambered thence through the skylight, and slid to the ground.

"Look here, Pickles," said Burton, as they went towards the house, "I'm going after those fellows. Being foreigners they are almost sure to have made for the Continent at once. I'll run down to the road and examine the tracks of their cycles; you've got an ABC in the house?"

"It is possible."

"Well, hunt it out and look up the boats for Calais. How long have they been gone?"

"Perhaps three-quarters of an hour."

"A dashed good start!" exclaimed Burton. "We'll save time if you bring the ABC down to the creek. Buck up, old chap; no wool-gathering now, for goodness' sake."

They parted. A brief examination of the tracks assured Burton that the cyclists had continued their journey eastward. They would probably run into the highroad to Dover somewhere about Norton Ash. Returning to the creek he was met by Micklewright with the buff-coloured timetable. Micklewright was limping a little.

"There's no Calais boat at this time of day," he said.

"Did you try Folkestone?"

"It didn't occur to me."

Burton took the time-table from him and turned over the pages rapidly.

"Here we are: Folkestone to Boulogne, 4.10. It's now 3.35," said Burton,

looking at his watch. "I can easily get to Folkestone in half an hour or less--possibly intercept the beggars if they don't know the road: in any case be in time to put the police on before the boat starts. You'll come, Pickles?"

"Well, no. I strained a muscle or two in scuffling with those gentlemen--and I've had nothing but newspaper since eight o'clock. By the way, you may as well take the only clue we have--this scrap of pulp. It is French, as you see. And, Teddy, don't get into hot water on my account. The resources of civilisation--as expressed in high explosives--are not exhausted."

Burton stuffed the newspaper into his pocket, and in three minutes was already well on the way to Folkestone. Micklewright watched the flying-boat until it was lost to sight; then, pressing his hand to his aching side, he returned slowly to the house.

The distance from the Luddenham Marshes to Folkestone is about twenty-five miles as the crow flies, and Burton had made the flight once in his flying-boat. Consequently, he was at no loss in setting his course. A brisk south-west wind was blowing, but it very little retarded his speed, so that he felt pretty sure of reaching the harbour by four o'clock. Keeping at an altitude of only a few hundred feet, he was able to pick up the well-known landmarks: Hogben's Hill, the Stour, the series of woods lying between that river and the Elham valley railway line; and just before four he alighted on the sea leeward of the pier, within a few yards of the steamer.

A small boat took him ashore. He avoided the crowd of holiday makers who had already gathered to watch him, and making straight for the pier, accosted a police inspector.

"Have you seen three men ride up on motor cycles, inspector?" he asked.

"No, sir, I can't say I have."

"Three foreigners, one a tall big fellow?"

"Plenty of foreigners have gone on board, sir. Is anything wrong?"

"Yes, they've assaulted and robbed a friend of mine--you may know his name: Dr. Bertram Micklewright, the inventor. They've stolen Government property, and it's of the utmost importance to prevent their crossing the Channel."

"Where did this take place, sir, and at what time?"

"At Luddenham Marshes beyond Faversham, just before three o'clock."

"They'd hardly have got here, would they? They'd have to come through Canterbury, between thirty and forty miles, and with speed limits here and there they'd only just about do it."

"I'll wait here, then. You'll arrest them if they come?"

"That's a bit irregular, sir," said the inspector, rubbing his chin. "You saw them do the job?"

"Well, no, I didn't."

"Then you can't be sure of 'em?"

"I'm afraid I can't, but there wouldn't be two sets of foreigners on motor cycles. You could detain them on suspicion, couldn't you?"

"I might, if you would take the responsibility."

"Willingly. I'll keep a look-out then."

It occurred to Burton that the men might leave the cycles and approach on foot, so he closely scrutinised all the passengers of foreign appearance who passed on the way to the boat. None of them answered to Micklewright's description.

"Haven't you got any clue to their identity, sir?" asked the inspector, who remained at his side.

"None; it happened during my absence. They tied up my friend and gagged him. I came across country in my flying machine yonder."

"They'll lose this boat for certain," said the inspector, as the steamer's warning siren sounded. "You're sure they are Frenchmen?"

"Yes; well, they left a French newspaper behind them."

"Do you happen to have it with you?"

Burton drew the crushed paper from his pocket, and handed it to the policeman, who unfolded it, and displayed a torn sheet, with only the letters IND remaining of the title.

"That's the *Indépendance Belge*," said the inspector at once. "I expect they're Belgians, and aren't coming here at all. Ostend's their mark, I wouldn't mind betting."

"Via Dover, of course. Is there a boat?"

"One at 4.30, sir. I'm afraid they've dished you."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Burton, glancing at his watch. "It's now 4.20; this boat's off. If the Ostend boat is ten minutes late too I can get to Dover in good time to have it searched."

"Then if I were you I'd lose no time, sir, and I hope you'll catch 'em."

Burton raced back to the boat that had brought him ashore. In five minutes he was on his own vessel, in two more he was in full flight before the favouring wind, and at 4.35 he dropped on the water in the lee of the Admiralty pier at Dover. But he had already seen that he was too late. The boat, which had evidently started on time, was at least half a mile from the pier.

"Yes, sir, I did see a big foreigner go on board at the last minute," said the policeman of whom Burton inquired ten minutes later. "He was carrying a small brown leather hand-bag. I took particular note of him, because he blowed like a grampus, and took off his hat to wipe his head, he was that hot."

"Was he bald?"

"As bald as the palm of your hand. A friend of yours, sir?"

"No," said Burton emphatically. "He's got away with a secret worth thou-

sands of pounds--millions perhaps, to a foreign navy."

The policeman whistled.

IV

Burton stood looking at the diminishing form of the steamboat. The constable touched his sleeve.

"You see that gentleman there, sir?" he said.

Following his glance, Burton saw a slim youthful figure, clad in a light tweed suit and a soft hat, leaning over the rail.

"Well?" he asked.

The constable murmured a name honoured at Scotland Yard.

"Put the case to him, sir," he added; "he can see through most brick walls." Burton hastened to the side of the detective.

"A man on that boat has stolen the secret of the new explosive for the British Navy," he said without preamble. "Can you stop him?"

The detective turned his keen eyes on his questioner and looked hard at him for a moment or two.

"Tell me all about it, sir," he said.

Burton hurriedly related all that had happened. "A cable to Ostend would be enough, wouldn't it?" he asked in conclusion.

"I'm afraid it would hardly do, sir," replied the detective. "Your description is too vague. Tall man about forty, bald, with a hand-bag--there may be dozens on the boat. It would be too risky. We have to be careful. I saw a notorious diamond thief go on board, but I couldn't arrest him, not having a warrant, and nothing certain to go upon. You had better go to the police station, tell the superintendent all you know, and leave him to communicate with the Belgian police in due course."

"And give the thief time to get rid of the stuff! If it once passes from his hands the secret will be lost to us, and any foreign Power may be able to fill its shells with Dr. Micklewright's explosive. It's too bad!"

He looked with bitter disappointment at the steamer, now a mere speck on the surface of the sea. Suddenly he had an idea.

"If I got to Ostend first," he said, "I could have the man arrested as he lands?"

The detective smiled.

"I don't think the Belgian police would make an arrest on the strength of your story, sir," he said. "Why, you can't even be sure your man is aboard. Ar-

resting the wrong party might be precious awkward for you and everybody."

"I'll risk that," cried Burton. "It's my funeral, any way."

"That little machine of yours is safe, I suppose, sir? It won't come down and bury you at sea?"

"No fear!" said Burton with a smile. "Still, in case of accidents, here's my card. All I ask is, don't give anything away to newspaper men for a couple of days, at any rate. It's to a newspaper man we owe the whole botheration."

"All right, sir; I'll give you a couple of days. I wish you luck."

Burton hurried to one of the small boats lying for hire alongside the pier, and was put on board his own vessel. He started the motor, but in his haste he failed to pull the lever with just that knack that jerks the floats from the surface. At the second attempt he succeeded, and the water-plane rose into the air as smoothly as a gull. The steamer was now out of sight, but he had a general idea of her direction, and hoped by rising to a good altitude soon to get a glimpse of her. The wind had freshened, and time being of the utmost importance, Burton congratulated himself on the possession of a Clift compass, by means of which he could allow for drift, and avoid fatal error in setting his course. The steamer had nearly an hour's start, but as he travelled at least twice as fast, he expected to overhaul her in about an hour if he did not mistake her direction.

His mind was busy as he flew. He had to admit the force of what the detective had said. It would almost certainly be difficult to induce the Belgian police to act on such slight information as he could give them; and in the bustle of landing, the criminal, of whose identity he could not be sure, might easily get away. Burton was beginning to feel that he had started on a wild-goose chase when, catching sight of the smoke of the vessel some miles ahead, he suddenly, without conscious reasoning, determined on his line of action. Such flashes sometimes occur at critical moments.

Waiting for a few minutes to make sure that the distant vessel was that in which he was interested, he bore away to the east, instead of following directly the track of the steamer. It was scarcely probable that the flying-boat had already been noticed from the deck. He described a half-circle of many miles, so calculated that when he approached the vessel it was from the east, at an angle with her course.

He was still at a considerable height, and as he passed over the vessel his view of the deck was obscured by the cloud of black smoke from her funnels. In a few seconds he wheeled as if to return on his track; but soon after recrossing the steamer he wheeled again, and making a steep volplané, alighted on the sea about half a mile ahead. Then with his handkerchief he began to make signals of distress. There was a considerable swell on the surface, and it might well have seemed to those on board the steamer who did not distinguish the flying-boat from an aeroplane that the frail vessel was in imminent danger.

[image]

Signals of distress

The steamer's helm was instantly ported; she slowed down and was soon alongside. A rope was let down by which Burton swung himself to the deck; and while he struggled through the crowd of excited passengers who clustered about him, the flying-boat was hoisted by a derrick, and the vessel resumed its course.

Burton made his way to the bridge to interview the captain.

"I'm very much obliged to you, sir," he said. "And I'm very sorry to have delayed you. My engine stopped."

"So did mine," returned the captain, with a rather grim look about the mouth, "or rather, I stopped them." Burton did not feel called upon to explain that his stoppage also had been voluntary. "And I shall have to push them to make up for the twenty minutes we have lost. You would not have drowned; I see your machine floats; but you might have drifted for days if I hadn't picked you up."

"It was very good of you," said Burton, feeling sorry at having had to practise a deception. "It's my first voyage across Channel. I started from Folkestone; better luck next time. I must pay my passage, captain."

"Certainly not," said the captain. "I won't take money from a gallant airman in distress. I have a great admiration for airmen; they run double risks. I wouldn't trust myself in an aeroplane on any account whatever."

Burton remained for some minutes chatting with the captain, then descended to the deck in search of his quarry, to be at once surrounded by a group of first-class passengers, who plied him with eager questions about his starting-point, his destination, and the nature of the accident that had brought him down. He answered them somewhat abstractedly, so preoccupied was he with his quest. His eyes roamed around, and presently he felt an electric thrill as he caught sight, on the edge of the crowd, of a tall portly figure that corresponded, he thought, to Micklewright's brief description. The man had a round red face, with a thick stiff moustache upturned at the ends. His prominent blue eyes were fixed intently on Burton. He wore a soft hat, and Burton, while replying to a lady who wanted to know whether air-flight made one sea-sick, was all the time wondering if the head under the hat was bald.

Disengaging himself by and by from those immediately around him, he edged his way towards this stalwart passenger. It gave him another thrill to see that the man held a small brown leather hand-bag. He felt that he was "getting warm." No other passenger carried luggage; this bag must surely contain some-

thing precious or its owner would have set it down. Burton determined to get into conversation with him, though he felt much embarrassed as to how to begin. The blue eyes were scanning him curiously.

"I congratulate you, sir," said the foreigner in English, politely lifting his hat. Burton almost jumped when he saw that the uncovered crown was hairless.

"Thank you, sir," he replied, in some confusion. "It was lucky I caught the boat."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he thought, "What an idiotic thing to say!" and his cheeks grew red.

"Zat ze boat caught you, you vould say?" said the foreigner, smiling. "But your vessel is a hydro-aeroplane, I zink so? Zere vas no danger zat you sink?"

"Well, I don't know. With a swell on, like this, it wouldn't be any safer than a cock-boat; and in any case, it wouldn't be too pleasant to drift about, perhaps for days, without food."

"Zat is quite right; ven ze sea is choppy, you feed ze fishes; ven it is calm, you have no chops. Ha! ha! zat is quite right. You do not understand ze choke?" he added, seeing that Burton did not smile.

"Oh yes! yes!" cried Burton, making an effort. "You speak English well, sir."

"Zank you, yes. I have practised a lot. I ask questions--yes, and ven zey ask you chust now vat accident bring you down, I do not quite understand all about it."

"It was quite an ordinary thing," said Burton, rather uncomfortably. The explanation he had given to the questioners was vague; he was loth to tell a deliberate lie. "Do you know anything about petrol engines, sir?"

"Oh yes, certainly. I ride on a motor-bicycle. One has often trouble viz ze compression."

"That's true," said Burton, feeling "warmer" than ever. The foreigner was evidently quite unsuspicious, or he would not have mentioned the motor-cycle. "We have excellent roads in England," he added, with a fishing intention.

"Zat is quite right; but zey are perhaps not so good as our roads in France, eh?"

"Your roads are magnificent, it's true; still--what do you say to the Dover Road?"

"Ah! Ze Dover Road; yes, it is very good, ever since ze Roman times, eh? Yes; I have travelled often on ze Dover Road, from Dover to Chatham, and vice versa. Viz zis bag!"

Burton looked hard at the bag. He wished it would open. One peep, he was sure, would be enough to convict this amiable Frenchman.

"I have somezink in zis bag," the Frenchman went on in a confidential tone--"somezink great, somezink magnificent,--*éclatant* as we say; somezink vat make

a noise in ze vorld."

He tapped the bag affectionately. Burton tingled; he would have liked to take the man by the throat and denounce him as a scoundrel. But perhaps if he were patient the confiding foreigner would open the bag.

"Indeed!" he said.

"Yes; a noise zat shall make ze hair stand on end. Ha! ha! Ah! you English. You are ze great inventors. Your Sims, your Edvards, your Rowland--ah! zey are great, zey are honoured by all ze crowned heads in ze vorld. Zat is quite right! I tell you! ... No; it is late. You shall be in Ostend, sir?"

"Yes."

"Zen you shall see, you shall hear, vat a great sensation I shall make. Now it gets dark; if you shall pardon me, I vill take a little sleep until ve arrive. Zen!..."

He lifted his hat again, and withdrew to a deck chair, where he propped the bag carefully under his head and was soon asleep.

V

Burton strolled up and down the deck, impatient for the boat to make the port. He was convinced: the man was French; he was tall, urbane, and bald; he rode a motor-cycle; he knew the Dover Road; he guarded his bag as something precious, and it contained something that was going to make a noise in the world. What so likely to do that as Micklewright's explosive!

One thing puzzled Burton; the man's allusion to English inventors--Sims, Edwards, Rowland--who were they? Burton subscribed to a good many scientific magazines, and kept closely in touch with recent inventions; but he did not recall any of these names. It flashed upon him that the Frenchman, rendered suspicious by his fishing questions, had mentioned the names as a blind; he had spoken of Sims, Edwards and Rowland when his mind was really full of Micklewright.

"If that's your game, it won't wash," he thought.

He determined, as soon as the vessel reached port, to hurry ashore, interview the Customs officers, and warn them in general terms of the dangerous nature of what the Frenchman carried. If only the bag had been opened and its contents revealed, he would not have hesitated to inform the captain, and have the villain detained. But the Customs officers, primed with his information, would insist on opening the bag, and then!--yes, there would undoubtedly be "a noise in the world," when it became known that so audacious a scheme had been detected and foiled.

The sun went down, the steamer plugged her way onward, and through the darkness the lamps of Ostend by and by gleamed faintly in the distance. Burton made his way to the bridge again, and asked the captain to allow the flying-boat to remain on the vessel till the morning; then he returned to the deck, and leant on the rail near the gangway.

All was bustle as the steamer drew near to the harbour. The passengers collected their belongings, and congregated. Some spoke to Burton; he hardly heeded them. He had his eye on the Frenchman, still slumbering peacefully.

The bells clanged; the vessel slowed; a rope was thrown to the pier; and two of the sailors stood ready to launch the gangway as soon as the boat came to rest. The moment it clattered on to the planks of the pier Burton was across, and hurried to the shed where the Customs officers, like spiders in wait for unwary flies, were lined up behind their counter, cool, keen, alert. He accosted the chief douanier, described the Frenchman in a few rapid sentences, suggested that the brown bag would repay examination, and receiving assurance that the proper inquiries should be made, posted himself outside at the corner of the shed in the dark, to watch the scene.

The passengers came by one by one, and answering the formal question, had their luggage franked by the mystic chalk mark and passed on. Burton's pulse throbbed as he saw the tall Frenchman come briskly into the light of the lamps.

"Here he is!" whispered the officers one to another.

"Have you anything to declare, monsieur?" asked one of them, with formal courtesy.

"No, no, monsieur," replied the man; "you see I have only a hand-bag."

He laid it on the counter to be chalked.

"Be so good as to open the bag, monsieur," said the officer.

The Frenchman stared; the passengers behind him pricked up their ears as he began to expostulate in a torrent of French too rapid for Burton to follow. The officer shrugged, and firmly repeated his demand. Still loudly protesting, the Frenchman drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, selected one, and with a gesture of despair laid open the bag to the officer's inspection.

Burton drew a little nearer and watched feverishly. The officer put his hand into the bag, and drew forth a bundle of what appeared to be striped wool. Exclaiming at its weight, he laid it on the counter, and began to unroll it. His colleagues smiled as he held aloft the pantaloons of a suit of pyjamas. He threw them down, and took up the object round which the garment had been wrapped. It was a large glass bottle, filled with a viscid yellowish liquid, and bearing a label.

"Voila!" shouted its owner. "Je vous l'avais bien dit."

The officer took up the bottle, eyeing it suspiciously. He examined the label; he took out the stopper and sniffed, then held the bottle to the noses of his

colleagues, who sniffed in turn.

"It will not explode?" he said to the Frenchman.

"Explode!" snorted the man scornfully. "It is harmless; it is perfect; it contains no petroleum; look, there is the warranty on the label. Bah!"

He struck a match and held it to the mouth of the open bottle, which the officer extended at arm's length. The flame flickered and went out.

"Voila!" said the Frenchman with a triumphant snort.

Then fumbling in his pocket he drew out a sheaf of flimsy papers. One of these he handed to the officer, who glanced at it, smiled, said, "Ah! oui! oui!" and replacing the stopper, rolled the bottle in the pyjamas again.

"But it is not yet certain," he exclaimed. "Monsieur will permit me."

He plunged his hand again into the bag, whose owner made a comical gesture of outraged modesty as the officer brought out, first the companion jacket of the pantaloons, then a somewhat ancient tooth-brush. He rummaged further, turned the bag upside down. It contained nothing else.

"A thousand excuses, monsieur," he said, replacing the articles, and chalking the bag.

"Ah! It is your duty," said the passenger magnanimously. "Good-night, monsieur."

Catching sight of Burton as he was passing on, he stopped.

"Ah! my friend, here you are," he said. "I give you vun of my announce. It has ze address. I see you to-morrow? Zat is quite right!"

Then he lifted his hat and went his way.

Burton thrust the slip of paper into his pocket without looking at it. He felt horribly disconcerted. The fluid in the bottle was certainly not Micklewright's explosive; that was a crystalline solid. He had made an egregious mistake. It was more than disappointing; it was humiliating. He had been engaged in a wild-goose chase indeed. His stratagem was wasted; his suspicions were unfounded; his deductions utterly fallacious. While he was dogging this innocent Frenchman, the real villain was no doubt on the other side of the sea, waiting for the night boat from Dover or perhaps Newhaven. He had made a fool of himself.

Despondent and irritated, he was about to find his way to the nearest hotel for the night, when he suddenly noticed a second portly figure approaching the shed among the file of passengers. The man was hatless; he was bald; he carried a brown leather hand-bag. His collar was limp; his face was clammy, and of that pallid greenish hue which betokens beyond possibility of doubt a severe attack of sea-sickness.

At the first glance Burton started; at the second he flushed; then, on the impulse of the moment, he sprang forward, and reaching the side of the flabby passenger at the moment when he placed his bag upon the counter, he laid his

hand upon it, and cried--

"My bag, monsieur!"

The bald-headed passenger glanced round in mere amazement, clutching his bag.

"Excuse me, monsieur," he said quietly, "it is mine."

The Customs officer looked from one to the other: the pallid foreigner, limp and nerveless; the ruddy Englishman, eager, strenuous and determined.

"Ah! You gave me the warning. You were mistaken," he said to Burton. "The other bag contained only pyjamas, a bottle, and a toothbrush; nothing harmful. Monsieur is too full of zeal; he may be mistaken again. He accuses this gentleman of stealing his bag? Well, that is a matter for the police. I will do my duty, then you can find a policeman. Have you anything to declare?" he concluded in his official tone.

"Nothing," said the foreigner.

"A thousand cigarettes!" cried Burton at the same moment.

Each had still a hand on the bag. At Burton's words the passenger gave him a startled glance, and Burton knew by the mingled wonder and terror in his eyes that this time he had made no mistake.

"Comment! A thousand cigarettes!" repeated the officer. "Messieurs must permit me to open the bag."

He drew it from their grasp. It opened merely by a catch. The officer peeped inside, and shot a questioning look at Burton, who bent over, and at a single glance recognised the small yellowish crystals.

"That's it!" he cried in excitement.

"Monsieur will perhaps explain," said the officer to the owner of the bag, who appeared to have become quite apathetic. "There are no cigarettes; no; but what is this substance? Is it on the Customs schedule? No. Very well, I must impound it for inquiry."

The man, almost in collapse from weakness, began to mumble something. The officer's remark about impounding the stuff disturbed Burton. If it got into expert hands Micklewright's secret would be discovered.

Acting on a sudden inspiration, he took a cigarette from his case, and struck a match.

"Eh, monsieur, it is forbidden to smoke," cried the officer sternly.

At the same time he nodded his head towards the placard "*Défense de fumer*" affixed to the wall.

"Ah! Pardon! Forbidden! So it is," said Burton, who was shading the lighted match within his rounded palm from the wind. He made as if to throw it away, but with a dexterous cast dropped it flaming into the open bag. Instantly there was a puff and whizz, and a column of thick suffocating smoke spurted up to

the roof. The officer started back with an execration. A lady shrieked; others of the passengers took to their heels. The air was full of pungent fumes and lurid exclamations, and in the confusion the owner of the bag quietly slipped away into the darkness. Burton stood his ground. His task was done. Every particle of Micklewright's explosive that had left the shores of England was dissipated in gas. The secret was saved.

[image]

"I give him in charge"

Choking and spluttering the officer dashed forward, shaking his fist in Burton's face, mingling terms of Gallic abuse with explosive cries for the police. A gendarme came up.

"I give him in charge," shouted the officer, with gesticulations. "It is forbidden to smoke; see, the place is full of smoke! The other man; where is he? It is a conspiracy. They are anarchists. Arrest the villain!"

"Monsieur will please come with me," said the gendarme, touching Burton on the sleeve.

"All right," said Burton cheerfully. "I can smoke as we go along?"

"It is not forbidden to smoke in the streets," replied the gendarme gravely.

And with one hand on the prisoner's arm, the other carrying the empty bag, he set off towards the town.

VI

Two evenings later, Burton descended on the creek in the Luddenham Marshes, and hastened with lightsome step to Micklewright's laboratory. It was the time of day when Micklewright usually ceased work and went home to his dinner.

"Still at it!" thought Burton, as he saw that the laboratory door was open.

He went on quickly and looked in. Micklewright was bending over his bench in his customary attitude of complete absorption.

"Time for dinner, old man," said Burton, entering.

"Hullo! That you! Come and look at this."

"Upon my word, that's a cool greeting after I've been braving no end of dangers for your sake."

"What's that you say? Look at this, Teddy; isn't it magnificent!"

Burton looked into the bowl held up for his inspection, and saw nothing but a dirty-looking mixture that smelt rather badly.

"You see, it's like this," said Micklewright, and went on to describe in the utmost technical detail the experiment upon which he had been engaged. Burton listened with resignation; he knew by experience that it saved time to let his friend have his talk out.

"Magnificent! I take your word for it," he said, when Micklewright had finished his description. "But look here, old man, doesn't it occur to you to wonder where I've been?"

"Why should it?" asked Micklewright in unaffected surprise. He looked puzzled when Burton laughed; then remembrance dawned in his eyes. "Of course; I recollect now. You went after those foreigners. I had almost forgotten them."

"Forgotten the beggars who had stolen your secret?" cried Burton.

"Hittite! Well, you see, it was gone; no good pulling a long face over it, though it was a blow after three years' work. I groused all day Sunday, but recognised it as a case of spilt milk, and this morning started on a new tack. I'm on the scent of something else. Whether it will be any good or not I can't say yet."

"Surely you got detectives down?"

"Well, no, I didn't. It's much the best to keep such things quiet. The fellows had got away with the stuff, and before the police could have done anything they'd be out of reach. So I just buckled to."

"Very philosophic of you!" said Burton drily. "I needn't have put myself about, then. Well, hand over fifty francs, and I'll cry quits."

"Fifty--francs, did you say? Won't shillings do?"

"No; I was fined in francs. I won't take advantage of you."

"I seem to be rather at sea," said Micklewright. "Have the French started air laws, and you broken 'em and been nabbed? But what were you doing in France?"

"Come and let's have some dinner," said Burton, putting his arm through his friend's. "I'm sure you don't eat enough. Any one will tell you that want of proper grub makes you dotty."

Micklewright locked up the laboratory, and went on with Burton to the house. Burton found his suit-case in the spare room and was glad to make a rapid toilet and change of clothes. In twenty minutes he was at one end of the dining-table, facing Micklewright at the other, and old Mrs. Jones was carrying in the soup. Burton waited, before beginning his story, until Micklewright had disposed of an excellent steak, and "looked more human," as he said; then--

"Since I saw you last, I've been to Ostend," he began.

"Jolly good oysters there," said Micklewright.

"Ah! You're sane at last! I didn't go for oysters, though; I went for--Hittite."

"You don't mean to say----" cried Micklewright.

"Don't be alarmed," Burton interrupted. "There's none there now. Just listen without putting your spoke in, will you!"

He related the incidents of his flights to Folkestone and Dover, his pursuit of the steamer, and the trick by which he had been taken on board.

"And then I made an ass of myself," he continued. "But it's owing--partly at any rate--to your lucid description, Pickles. Tall, stout, bald, moustache, brown bag; all the details to a T. I got into conversation with the man, and when it turned out that he was a motor-cyclist, knew the Dover Road, and had something in his bag that was going to make a noise in the world, I made sure I'd got the right man.

"You can imagine how sold I felt when, after persuading the Customs fellows to insist on opening his bag, all they fished out was a suit of pyjamas, an old toothbrush, and a bottle full of a custardy-looking stuff. He was very good-tempered about it--much more than I should have been if my wardrobe had been exposed. I was feeling pretty cheap when another fellow came along, whom your description fitted equally well, though he wasn't a scrap like the first man. He had evidently been horribly sea-sick; had gone below, I suppose, which was the reason why I hadn't seen him before. The wind had carried away his hat, and his bald pate betrayed him. I got his bag opened; had to pretend that it was mine, and full of cigarettes; and your stuff being loose in the bag it went up with a fine fizz when I dropped a match into it. That's why you owe me fifty francs. They lugged me off to the police station, and next day fined me fifty for smoking on forbidden ground, though, as I pointed out, *I* hadn't done any smoking, and they ought really to have fined the fellow who had the stuff in his bag. They were very curious as to what that was, but of course I didn't give it away. And it's rather rotten to find that after all you don't care a copper cent!"

"Not at all, my dear chap; I'm extremely grateful to you. I only hope you won't ruin me."

"Ruin you! What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, with Hittite safe, I shall be so sickening rich that I am almost bound to get lazy."

"If that's your trouble, just hand it over to me; *I* don't mind being rich, though I'm not an inventor. But I say, Pickles, that reminds me: do you know any inventors of the names of Sims, Edwards and--what was the other?--Rowland?"

"Can't say I do. Why?"

"Why, the wrong man--the bottle man, you know--gassed about the greatness of our English inventors, and mentioned these three specially, to put me off the scent, I thought. Of course his talk of inventors made me all the more sure that he had your stuff in his bag."

"Well, I can't recall any of them. Sims--you've never heard me talk of any

one named Sims, have you, Martha?" he asked of the housekeeper, who entered at this moment with the coffee.

"No, sir; though if you don't mind me saying so, I've been a good mind to name him myself this long time, only I didn't like to be so bold."

"My dear good woman, what are you driving at?" asked Micklewright in astonishment.

"Why, sir, I dare say busy gentlemen like yourself don't notice it till some one tells 'em, their combs and brushes being kept tidy unbeknownst; but the truth is, I've been worriting myself over that--I reelly don't like to mention it, but there, being old enough to be your mother--I mean, sir, that little bald spot jest at the crown of the head, sir--jest at the end of the parting, like."

Micklewright laughed as he put his hand on the spot.

"Well, but--Sims?" he said.

"Well, sir, it didn't ought to be there in a gentleman of your age, and thinks I to myself: 'Now, if only the master would try one of them hair-restorers he might have his locks back as luxurious as ever they was.' And I cut the particklers out of that *Strand* magazine you gave me, sir, and how to choose between 'em I *don't* know, they're all that good. There's Edwards' Harlene for the Hair, and Rowland's antimacassar oil, and Tatcho, made by that gentleman as writes so beautiful in the Sunday papers; he's the gentleman you mean, I expect--George R. Sims."

The men shouted with laughter, and Mrs. Jones withdrew, happy that her timid suggestion had given no offence.

"To think of you in pursuit of a hairdresser gives me great joy," said Micklewright presently. "He *must* have been a hairdresser, Teddy."

"I suppose he was," assented Burton rather glumly. "By the way"--he felt in his pockets. "He gave me a handbill; I didn't look at it at the moment; it's in the pocket of my overall, of course. I'll fetch it."

He returned, smoothing the crumpled slip of paper, and smiling broadly.

"Here you are," he said. "'Arsène Lebrun, artist in hair, having returned from London with a marvellous new specific for promoting a luxuriant vegetation'--I am translating, Pickles--'on the most barren soil, respectfully invites all gentlemen, especially those with infantine heads'--that's very nice!--'to assist at a public demonstration on Sunday, August 20. Arsène Lebrun will then massage with his fructifying preparation the six most vacant heads in Ostend, and lay the seeds of a magnificent harvest, which he will subsequently have the honour to reap.' Hittite isn't in it with that, old man."

At this moment there was a double knock at the door, and Mrs. Jones soon re-entered with a letter.

"From the Admiralty," said Micklewright, tearing open the envelope. "Listen to this, Teddy."

"'I am directed by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to say that they are prepared to pay you £20,000 for the formula of your new explosive, and a royalty, the amount of which will be subsequently arranged, on every ton manufactured. They lay down as a peremptory condition that the formula be kept absolutely secret, and that the explosive be supplied exclusively to the British navy. I shall be glad if you will intimate your general agreement with these terms.'"

"Congratulations, old boy!" cried Burton heartily, grasping his friend's hand. "It's magnificent!"

[image]

Congratulations

"I really think you are right, and as it's very clear that but for you I shouldn't have been able to accept any terms whatever, it's only fair to----"

"Nonsense!" Burton interrupted. "All I want is fifty francs, for illicit smoking--a cheap smoke, as it turns out."

"Can't do it, my boy. Wait till I get my Lords Commissioners' cheque."

A week or two later, Burton's firm received an order from Dr. Micklewright for a water-plane of the best type, with all the latest improvements in canoe floats, and the finest motor on the market. When the machine was ready for delivery, Micklewright paid a visit to the factory.

"It's a regular stunner, old man," said Burton, as he explained its points to his friend.

"Well, Teddy, do me the favour to accept it as a birthday present--a little memento of your trip to Ostend."

[image]

Chapter II Heading

The DEATH'S HEAD HUSSAR

I

"My compliments, Burton! You brought her down magnificently," said Captain Rolfe. "Not much damage done, I hope?"

The airman stooping over the engine grunted. In a moment or two a grimy face was upturned, the tall figure straightened itself, and a crisp voice said ruefully--

"Magneto smashed to smithereens!"

He passed round to the side of the machine, and retailed at short intervals the items of a catalogue of damage.

"A stay cut! ... Two holes in the upper plane! ... Four in the lower! ... Chips and dents galore! Still, we can fall back on the old wife's consolation: it might have been worse."

"All the same, it's precious awkward," said Captain Rolfe, putting his finger through a hole in the lower plane. "The Bosches will be here in ten minutes."

"Not under twenty. They've some difficult country to cross. But, of course, there's no time to lose. It's lucky there's a village close by."

Edward Burton, airman, with Captain Rolfe, who accompanied him as observer, had just made an enforced volplané and landed safely after running the gauntlet of German rifles and machine guns. At the moment when he was flattering himself on being out of range, a shell burst close beside the machine, bespattering it with bullets and putting the engine out of action.

Rolfe had seen cavalry galloping in their direction. The sudden descent would apprise the enemy of what had happened. Whether in ten minutes or in twenty, there was no doubt that the arrival of the Germans would place the airmen in a tight corner.

The first thought of the trooper is for his horse. The airman is concerned for the state of his aeroplane. It was not till long afterwards that Rolfe and Burton discovered that they, too, had not come off unscathed. Luckily it was only Rolfe's sword-hilt that had been shattered, not his groin; while Burton examined with a wondering curiosity two neat black holes in the loose sleeve of his overalls.

It did not occur to either of them that there was at least plenty of time to slip away and hide before the Germans came up. Their instinct was to save the aeroplane--a hopeless proposition, one would have thought.

Along the road from the village, a quarter of a mile away, half the population was already speeding to the scene. The half, alas! was now the whole. There were women old and young, boys and girls, old men and men long past their prime; but there was no male person from seventeen to fifty except the village idiot, who flung his arms about as he ran, making inarticulate noises.

"Hang it all!" Burton ejaculated. "A crowd like this will dish any chance we might have had."

The crowd suddenly parted; the men doffed their hats, the women bobbed, as they made way for a horseman. It was an old straight figure, with short snow-white hair and a long grizzled moustache. He cantered through the throng, turned into the field on which the aeroplane lay, and reined up before the Englishmen.

[image]

"You have had an accident"

"You have had an accident, messieurs?" he said, raising his hat.

"Worse than that, monsieur," replied Rolfe, in fluent French. "The Germans have hit us; the machine is useless; they are on our track."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Frenchman. Then, turning to the crowd who had flocked up behind him and stood gaping around, he spoke in quick, staccato phrases, in a tone of command. "Back to your houses, my good women. Take the children. These gentlemen are of our brave ally. You men, drag the aeroplane to the inn. Bid Froment lift the trap-door of his cellar ready to let the machine down. Some of you smooth away the tracks behind it. Quick! You, Guignet, post yourself on the mound yonder and watch for the Germans. The inn cellar is large, messieurs; there will be plenty of room. As to yourselves----"

The wrinkles of his aged face deepened.

"Ah, I have it!" he exclaimed. Turning to Rolfe, he went on: "You are an English officer, monsieur; that says itself. You have observations to report. Take my horse; it is not mine, but borrowed from one of my tenants; my own are with the army. There is no other in the village. It will serve you."

"Thank you, monsieur," said Rolfe, as the old man dismounted. "In the interests of our forces----"

"Hasten, monsieur," the old man interrupted. "Guignet waves his arms. He has seen the Germans. As for you, monsieur----"

"I will go to the inn," said Burton.

"My château is at your service, monsieur, but I fear it will prove an unsafe refuge. A haystack, or a barn----"

"I must stay by the aeroplane, monsieur; get it repaired if possible."

The old man shrugged. Guignet came up.

"The Bosches have taken the wrong road, monsieur le marquis," he said. "They are riding, ma foi! how quickly, towards old Lumineau's farm."

"That gives you more time," said the old gentleman to Burton. "Pray use it

to save yourself. They will not be long discovering their mistake. Adieu! I salute in you your brave nation."

Bowing, he hurried away across the fields towards a large château that reared itself among noble trees half a mile distant. Burton followed the crowd towards the village inn.

"A fine old fellow!" he thought, "but he doesn't know the Germans if he supposes that the wine-cellar will be a safe place. I must find somewhere better than that."

He overtook the men before they reached the village. Passing the ancient church, an idea occurred to him.

"Is there a crypt?" he asked.

"Parfaitement, monsieur," a man replied.

"Halt a minute."

He hastened to the priest's house adjoining, at the door of which stood the curé in his biretta and long soutane. A minute's conversation settled the matter.

"It is a good cause, monsieur," said the curé. "Direct our friends."

Superintended by Burton, the men wheeled the machine through the great door into the church. While Burton rapidly unscrewed the planes, willing hands opened up the floor, and in a quarter of an hour the aeroplane was lowered into the crypt.

"Is there an engineer in the village?" Burton asked.

"Mais non, monsieur, but there is Boitelet, the smith--a clever fellow, monsieur. You should have seen him set monsieur le capitaine's automobile to rights. Boitelet is your man."

Burton hurried to the smithy. Boitelet, a shaggy giant of fifty years or so, accompanied him back to the church.

"Ah ça!" he exclaimed on examining the engine. "I can repair it, yes; but I must go for material to the town, ten miles away. It will be a full day's work, and what is monsieur to do, with the Bosches at hand?"

Burton thought quickly.

"Make me your assistant," he said after a minute or two. "I'll strip off my overalls and clothes; lend me things--a shirt and apron. A little more grease and dirt will disguise me."

"But monsieur is young," said the smith. "All our young men are at the war. The Bosches will make you prisoner--shoot you, perhaps."

"An awkward situation, truly," said Burton, rubbing a greasy hand over his face. Suddenly he remembered the half-witted stripling among the crowd. Could he feign idiocy as an explanation of his presence in the village? He could mop and mow, but nothing could banish the gleam of intelligence from his eyes. And his tongue!--he spoke French fairly well, but his accent would inevitably betray

him to any German who chanced to be a linguist.

"There is only one thing," he cried. "I must pretend to be deaf and dumb. Tell everybody, will you?"

"It is clever, monsieur, that idea of yours," said the smith, laughing. "Yes; you are Jules le sourd-muet, burning to fight, but rejected because you could never hear the word of command. But you must be careful, monsieur; a single slip, and--voilà!"

He shrugged his shoulder expressively.

"The Bosches! The Bosches!" screamed a group of frightened children, rushing up the street.

The people fled into their houses and shut the doors. Only the curé and the smith were visible, the latter standing at his door leaning on his hammer, with an angry frown upon his swarthy face. Within the smithy Burton was making a rapid change of dress. He rolled up his own clothes and equipment and threw them into a corner behind a heap of old iron, and donned the dirty outer garments hurriedly provided by the smith. After a moment's hesitation he ferreted out his revolver case from the bundle, and slipped the revolver inside his blouse.

"If they search me, I'm done for," he thought. "But they would shoot the smith if they found the thing here, so it's as broad as it is long. The case must go up the chimney."

Then, completely transformed, he came to the door in time to see a troop of the Death's Head Hussars gallop up the street.

They reined up at the door of the smithy.

"Now, you dog, answer me," said the major in command. "And tell the truth, or I'll cut your tongue out. Have you seen an aeroplane hereabout?"

"Oui da, mon colonel," replied the smith, with an ironical courtesy that delighted Burton. "I did see an aeroplane, it might be an hour ago. It came down close to those poplars yonder, but rose in a minute or two and sailed away to the west."

"Go and see if he is telling the truth," said the officer to two of his men. "And you, smith, look to my horse's shoes. Who is this young fellow? A deserter? a coward?"

"Oh, he's brave enough, mon colonel," the smith answered. "But the poor wretch is deaf and dumb, a sore trouble to himself and his friends. You may shout, and he will not hear you; and as to asking for his dinner, he can't do it. I only employ him out of compassion."

The officer glanced at Burton, who was trying to assume that pathetically eager expression, that busy inquiry of the eyes, which characterises deaf mutes.

"If he were a German we'd make him shoot, deaf or not," said the major. "You French are too weak. Well?"

The troopers had returned, and sat their horses rigidly at the salute.

"Without doubt an aeroplane descended there, Herr Major," one of them reported, "and it flew up again, for there are no more tracks."

"It is not worth while continuing the chase. Night is coming on. Quarter yourselves in the village--and keep the people quiet. No one is to leave his house."

The troopers saluted and rode off, leaving a captain, two lieutenants, and four orderlies with the major.

"Look alive, smith," cried that officer, in the domineering tone evidently habitual with him. "Are the shoes in good order?"

The smith turned up the hoofs one after another, and pronounced them perfectly shod.

"Very well; if any of the troopers' horses need shoeing, see that it is done promptly, or it will be the worse for you. Now for the château, gentlemen; monsieur le marquis will be delighted to entertain us."

There was a look upon his face that Burton could not fathom--an ugly smile that made him shiver. The horsemen rode away, and Boitelet, the smith, spat upon the ground.

II

"Come inside, monsieur," murmured the smith, glancing round to see that no German was within hearing. Then he threw up his hands and groaned.

"He is an insolent hound," said Burton, sympathetically.

"Ah, monsieur, it is not that; all these Prussians are brutes. I fear for monsieur le marquis."

"Who is the marquis? He has a soldierly look."

"He was a fine soldier, monsieur. Every Frenchman knows his name. In the army he was plain General du Breuil; here in his own country, where we love him, we give him his true title, that has come to him from the days of long ago. Ah! there is great trouble for him. I know that man."

"The major?"

"Major he may be; spy he was. It is clear. Listen, monsieur. Some three years ago, before monsieur le marquis retired from the army, he had in his service a secretary, said to be an Alsatian, very useful to monsieur, who was compiling his memoirs. One day he was dismissed, none of us knew why. Monsieur le marquis had discovered something, no doubt. There was a violent scene at the château. Monsieur's son, Captain du Breuil, kicked the secretary down the steps. He came

into the village, hired a *calèche* to drive him to the station, and departed. We have seen no more of him until this day. He is the major."

"You are sure?"

"It is certain, monsieur. He was then clean shaven, and now wears a moustache, but I know the scar on his cheek."

"And you fear he will insult the marquis?"

"Worse than that, monsieur. A few days ago monsieur le capitaine, brave soldier like his father, was wounded in action only a mile or two away, when our gallant cuirassiers charged the Bosches and drove them helter-skelter from their trenches. He was found on the field by old Guignet, and carried secretly to the château, and there he lies, horribly hurt by shrapnel."

"And now they will make him prisoner?"

"That would be bad enough, but I fear worse. The Bosches are brutal to all. What must we expect from a man who has a grudge to pay off, and finds his enemy helpless in his clutches? The major will not forgive his kicking."

"It's a bad look-out, certainly," said Burton. "I like your old general; he came to our help so quickly. But what about my engine?"

"Ah, oui, monsieur, it is a pity. I dare not leave the village now. The Bosches passed quickly through here in their retreat a few days ago; I did not expect to see their ugly faces again. You must wait, monsieur. Come into my house, and share our soup. If God pleases, the hounds will go again to-morrow."

Burton accepted the good man's offer of hospitality, and shared a simple meal with him, and his wife, and two wide-eyed children who gazed with interest at the stranger.

When the meal was nearly finished, the smith suddenly exclaimed--

"Ah! here comes old Pierre, with a German. Have a care, monsieur. Remember you are deaf and dumb."

Looking out of the window into the darkling street, Burton saw a bent old man tottering along by the side of one of the orderlies who had recently ridden away.

"They are not coming here, Dieu merci!" said the smith at his elbow. "They are going to the butcher's. These Germans eat like hogs."

"Who is the old man?" Burton asked.

"Servant of monsieur le marquis, monsieur. They have grown old together. There is no other left in the château. Some are at the war; the rest fled, maids and men, when the Germans came before. Ah! it is sad for monsieur and madame in their old age, and their son lying wounded, too."

The old serving-man passed from the butcher's to the baker's, and thence to other shops, with the orderly always at his side. Soon the old man was staggering under a load of purchases. He faltered and stopped, and the orderly shouted at

him, and threatened him with his sword. Burton's blood boiled. He would have liked to catch the German by the neck and shake him until he howled for mercy.

[image]

The German way

Then an idea struck him. If he offered to help the laden old man he would make some return for the general's kindness; perhaps he might be of some further service in the château. He made the suggestion to the smith.

"It is madness, monsieur. You would put your head into the lion's mouth."

"What more natural than that a deaf mute should earn a sou by using his muscles? Arrange it, my friend."

"They say you English are mad, monsieur," said the smith with a shrug. "A la bonne heure! But you will get more kicks than sous."

"Make an opportunity to tell the old man that I am deaf and dumb, and that he is to pretend he knows me. He must inform his master and mistress also. Will he be discreet?"

"He will be anything you please for the sake of monsieur le marquis. Come, then, monsieur."

They left the house, and came upon the scene just as the orderly had terrorised the old man into making another attempt to carry his burden. The smith soon discovered that the orderly knew no French. He arranged the matter by signs, pointing to Burton's mouth and ears, and indicating that he was muscularly strong. At the same time he spoke rapidly in French to old Pierre.

"Ah, bon, bon!" said the old man. "I understand perfectly. Be sure I will tell the master. Monsieur may rely upon me."

Burton shouldered more than half the load, and set off for the château side by side with Pierre, the orderly following.

III

The Château du Breuil had been luckier than many similar country houses that stood in the line of the German advance. Whether by accident or a rare considerateness, it had not been shelled, and the officer who had last quartered himself there, though a German, was also a gentleman. It stood, a noble building, in its

little park, whole and intact as the first marquis built it in the reign of Henri Quatre.

At either end was a projecting wing of two stories, the wings being connected by the long one-storied building that contained the living-rooms. Burton found the part of deaf mute irksome; he wished to question old Pierre as to the quarters in which the Germans had disposed themselves. But he perforce kept silence, listening to a fragmentary dialogue in German between the orderly and Pierre, who, as he afterwards learnt, had been valet to the marquis when the latter, as a young man, was military attaché to the French embassy at Berlin.

They arrived at the kitchen entrance. Pierre went in first, and at once addressed an old white-haired lady who was stuffing a chicken at the kitchen table. He spoke so rapidly and in so low a tone that Burton could not follow his words, but he gathered their purport when the old lady glanced at him, and signed to him to lay down his load on the table.

"Madame la marquise has understood," he thought.

The orderly waited awhile; then, seeing that the lady had set Pierre and the deaf mute to pare potatoes and turnips, he went off to report that preparations for dinner were at last in train.

"A thousand thanks, monsieur," whispered the marquise when the German's back was turned. "It was good of you to help old Pierre. But, believe me, it is unwise of you to stay. If you should be discovered---- If you made a slip----"

"Madame, to run risks is my daily work," said Burton. "I am glad to serve you--even in the capacity of kitchen-maid."

The marquise smiled wearily.

"We are playing strange parts, God help us!" she said. "I am in great distress, monsieur. The German officer----"

"Boitelet has told me about him, madame," said Burton. "Pardon: I interrupt; but we may have little time. Will you tell me what has happened?"

"My poor son! They dismissed our good doctor who was attending him; they carried him, ill as he is, from his own room to one of the servants' rooms, and there they have locked him in with my husband. It is on the floor above us. They have taken our rooms in the other wing for themselves. They have ransacked the wine-cellar, and loaded the table in the dining-room with my poor husband's finest vintage. But it is not what they have done but what they may do that fills me with dread. That horrible man----"

Old Pierre, who was standing near the door, at this moment put his finger quickly to his lips. When the orderly entered, the marquise was turning the chicken on the spit, and Burton was cleaning the knives.

"The old frau is slow," said the German to Pierre. "The officers are growing impatient. She had better hurry, or there will be trouble."

"Madame la marquise will serve the dinner when it is ready," said Pierre, quietly.

"Teufel! You are insolent," cried the orderly, striking the old man across the face.

Burton smothered the exclamation that rose to his lips. The marquise flashed at the German such a look of indignant scorn that he was abashed, and went out muttering sullenly.

"The visit of that horrible man," the old lady went on, ignoring the underling's brutality, "is not accidental, I am sure. He contemplates vengeance. He was dismissed with contumely, and I fear he will make my poor son pay."

Burton could only murmur his sympathy. He watched with admiration the quick, deft actions of the marquise, who prepared the dinner as skilfully as her own cook could have done.

There was no opportunity for further conversation. The orderly returned, and lolled in a chair, commenting on the old lady's movements in offensive tones that made Burton tingle. When the dishes were ready, the marquise told Pierre to carry them in.

"No, no, old witch," said the orderly, with a chuckle. "The Herr Major is very particular; she must serve him herself."

Pierre translated this to his mistress, protesting that she must not submit to such indignity.

"Eh bien, mon ami," she said, "they cannot hurt me more. For my son's sake I will be cook and bonne in one. Carry the dishes; I will show them how a marquise waits at table."

Burton assisted the old man to convey the dishes to the dining-room, following the marquise. At their entrance there was a shout of laughter. Four officers sat at the table--the major, his captain, and two moon-faced lieutenants.

"Where are your cap and apron, wench?" cried the major. "Go and put them on at once. And make that dumb dog there understand that he is not to bring his dirty face inside; he can hand the things to you through the hatch."

The marquise compressed her lips, and, without replying, returned to the kitchen, and came back in a maid's cap and apron. What was meant for indignity and insult seemed to Burton, watching from the hatch, to enhance the lady's dignity. She moved about the table with the quickness of a waiting maid and the proud bearing of a queen, paying no heed to the coarse pleasantries of the Germans, or to their complaints of the food, of which, nevertheless, they devoured large quantities.

"A tough fowl, this," said the major, "as old as the old hen herself."

"Ha, ha!" laughed his juniors, in whom the champagne they had already drunk induced a facile admiration of the major's wit.

As the meal progressed, and the Germans' potations deepened, their manners went from bad to worse. They commenced an orgy of plate-smashing, flinging pellets of damp bread at one another and at pictures on the walls. Burton's fingers tingled; from his place at the hatch he could have shot them one by one with the revolver that lay snug in his blouse. But he contained his anger. The four orderlies were in an adjacent room; the village was filled with the troopers; and hasty action would probably involve the destruction of the château and the massacre of its long-suffering inhabitants.

Presently they called for coffee, and the major went to the marquis's cigar cupboard, promising his subordinates the best smoke of their lives. The champagne seemed to have affected him less than the other members of the party, and Burton gained the impression that he was holding himself in for the accomplishment of some sinister purpose.

Dismissing the marquise with a curt and contemptuous "Gehen Sie aus," he called in an orderly to lock her in the upper room with her husband and son.

"Now get your own suppers and turn in," he said. "You may be disturbed; the sneaking Englishmen are somewhere in the neighbourhood; so keep a man on guard to give warning, and post a sentry in the corridor. Send Vossling to me."

His own orderly entered. The major opened a fresh bottle, and passed it round the table; then with a "Verzeihen Sie mir" to his companions, he rose, and took the man into the passage out of earshot. Burton had slipped back into the kitchen; the passage appeared to be vacant.

A few minutes later old Pierre, his face blanched to the colour of chalk, staggered into the kitchen.

"What is the matter?" asked Burton, alarmed.

He poured out a little brandy, and held the glass to the old man's pale and quivering lips. Pierre gulped the liquid, looked around with horror in his eyes, and signed to Burton to throw the door wide open.

"They must not know, monsieur," he said in a whisper, tottering to a chair.

"What is the matter?" Burton repeated.

"I was in the passage, I heard them coming. They are not there, monsieur?"

"No, there is no one," said Burton, looking out through the open door.

"I slipped into the dark ante-room, monsieur, and hid behind the tall clock. They came in."

"Who?"

"The major--Schwikkard, the accursed spy, and his man. I heard what they said. 'The old marquis is a bitter enemy of Germany,' said Schwikkard. 'He fought against us in '70. He is a dangerous man. Now, if the west wing of the château caught fire--*caught fire*, you understand--say, in the early morning.' ... They are not there, monsieur?"

"No. Go on."

"'Caught fire!' he said. Mon Dieu! 'In the early morning--not too early, for that would disturb the sleep of some good Germans; but not too late, for that would bring the whole village here. If the west wing were burned, and all in it'--*all in it*, monsieur!--'it would be a good thing for Germany. Understand,' he said, 'it will be an accident. We should all try to put the fire out, but we should not succeed, naturally. These old places burn well. You understand? Well then, good-night--and see that you don't call me too soon--versteht sich!' The orderly chuckled, monsieur. Mon Dieu! Monsieur et madame, le pauvre capitaine! Ah ciel! Quelle horreur!"

IV

The old man sank back in his chair, half fainting. Burton gave him more brandy. Aghast at the atrocious villainy of the scheme--incredible but for the crimes which had already stained the German arms--he was for the moment unable to think of anything but the scene he saw in imagination--flames illuminating the dawn, eating away the staircase, enclosing the three helpless people above in a fiery furnace.

The old man groaned aloud.

"Take care!" whispered Burton. "Tell me, are there arms in the house?"

"Why, yes, monsieur; a rifle and two revolvers, in the captain's room--well hidden, par exemple!"

"Is there a back staircase to the upper rooms?"

"By that door yonder, monsieur," replied Pierre, pointing to a small door in the corner.

"If anybody comes and asks about me, say that I have gone home. Pull yourself together for the sake of monsieur and madame."

"But, monsieur----"

"Chut! The party is breaking up. Listen! They are going to their rooms in the east wing. Courage, my friend!"

He extinguished the oil lamp, pressed Pierre's hand, and stole noiselessly through the door in the corner. It opened to a narrow staircase. At the head of this there was a passage leading between bedrooms to the main staircase farther along. There was no lamp in the passage, but a faint shine through a skylight lit dimly its farther end. And just as Burton gained the top step, and peered cautiously round the edge of the wall, he was amazed to see Major Schwikkard unlock a door on

the left, and enter the room.

"Go into the next room," came the curt command in French.

"Monsieur, I cannot leave my son," protested the marquise. "Have you no humanity at all?"

"Gabble is useless. Go into the next room, and take the old man with you. Or shall I shoot him before your eyes?"

The two old people came into the passage, followed by the major, who hustled them into the adjoining apartment, locked them in, and returned. Burton, dreading lest he intended to proceed at once to extremes with the wounded man, and resolved at any cost to prevent it, darted on tip-toe along the passage to the room in which the marquis and his wife were shut up, silently unlocked the door, and whispering, "Courage, monsieur et madame: await my return," he left them, and went to the next door. It was closed.

Through it he heard the German's voice. It was no time to shirk risks. Grasping the handle firmly, he turned it, and gently pushed the door, little by little, until he could see into the room.

The German was seated on a chair by the bedside, his back to the door, ostentatiously cutting a fresh cigar. Beside him was a small cabinet with medicines. On it he had laid his revolver, out of the reach of the young soldier on the bed. They presented a strange contrast, the blond, bulky German, red-faced, brimming with physical energy, and the Frenchman, whose eyes, feverishly bright, gleamed out of pale sunken cheeks, and whose emaciated hands lay idle on the coverlet. His dark head propped on the pillow, he lay perfectly still, corpse-like save for his burning eyes.

"An excellent cigar!" said the German. "Who should know that better than I? Once more I am indebted to your amiable parents for their hospitality. I make my acknowledgments. Madame la marquise has been most attentive; she looked charming, if a little faded, in cap and apron; and you would have been delighted to see her handing the plates."

The invalid's fingers twitched; a flush mantled his cheeks. He tried to lift his head, but it sank back weakly upon the pillow. Burton felt that the German was watching his victim with malicious satisfaction. The shaft had struck home.

"Don't rise, don't rise, my dear sir. I realise how little our good German shells suit the constitution of you Frenchmen. You have no stamina, you know: a puff"--he blew out a cloud of smoke--"and you are gone!

"You scarcely hoped, perhaps, to see me again after our last parting at the gates of your hospitable château? You find it, perhaps, a strange chance that brings me again beneath this roof? Yet perhaps it is not so strange after all, for, helpless though I was at the time, I vowed that some day or other I would return. And thus we meet, sooner than I could have hoped--our parts somewhat changed.

I was then a helpless German in France; you are now a helpless Frenchman in what is going to be Germany. When you were up and I was down, you heaped upon me insults and abuse, and struck me--me, a well-born Prussian!--because I did my duty to my country. Did you reflect? Did it ever cross your French mind that a German, a Junker, a soldier, a man of culture, would not brook the insolent perversity of one of your decadent race? Now I am up and you are down, and we can square accounts. You are to learn what it is to strike a German. Of this your château, of you and the vile French brood within it, there shall not remain to-morrow aught but ashes. That is what I have promised myself these three years. I will pay my vow!"

During this speech, hissed out in a tone of the bitterest rancour, the German had held his cigar between finger and thumb, lifting his hand now and then to emphasise his words. Perceiving that it had gone out, he cut another, lit it, and lolled insolently in his chair, his long legs stretched beneath the bed, as if gloating over his intended victim. The young captain had not uttered a word. No change of countenance revealed his feelings, or so much as hinted that he had heard the German's tirade. His eyes appeared to look past his tormentor, but nothing in their expression warned Schwikkard of what he saw.

There was a brief interval of silence; then the German drew up his legs.

"Sleep well!" he said. "I assure you your sleep shall be a long one!"

He flicked the ash of his cigar into one of the medicine glasses, and was about to rise, when a hand shot over his shoulder, and grasped his revolver. Turning on his chair with a start, he flinched as his right ear touched the cold muzzle of a second revolver which Burton pointed at him.

[image]

AN INTERRUPTION

"Sit down!" said Burton, quietly, in French. "If you make the slightest sound, I will shoot you on the spot."

The German's face blanched under its sun-tan. A muzzle to the right, a muzzle to the left, each within a few inches of his head! Speechless, he sank down into his chair, and the cigar fell upon the floor.

Covering the shrinking German with the revolvers, Burton glanced round the room, and moved towards an electric bell-push in one of the walls.

"Does it communicate with the kitchen?" he asked the wounded man, who nodded--weakness and the thrill of emotion bereft him of speech.

Burton rang the bell--a single sharp ring. In a few moments Pierre appeared. The expression of foreboding dread in his eyes gave way to consternation, joy, eagerness, in turn.

"Some stout cord, Pierre," said Burton, "and shut the door behind you. My revolver may go off, and it would be a pity to disturb your master's guests."

The irony was lost upon Major Schwikkard. The turning of the tables seemed to have completely unnerved him. It is, perhaps, not true that all bullies are cowards at heart; but a man is tested by adversity.

Pierre soon returned with the cord, and in a few minutes he trussed the German securely, Burton standing over him with a revolver.

"Now a gag!" Burton said. "Take one of those strips of linen; monsieur le capitaine will spare us one of his bandages."

At this the German found voice at last.

"You--you treacherous----"

"Not so loud, monsieur l'espion!" said Burton, fingering the revolver.

The German gurgled.

"You will--all be--shot," he gasped, "as soon as they discover----"

"Allons!" exclaimed Pierre, thrusting the gag firmly between his jaws, "it is done, monsieur."

"There is an unoccupied room, Pierre?" asked Burton.

"Assuredly, monsieur, at the end of the passage."

"Then we will take him there, and tie him down on the bed. His friends will no doubt miss him in the morning, and release him--perhaps about breakfast time!"

Such was Burton's contempt for the man that he felt no touch of compunction at the effect his words produced. Pierre and he were carrying the German between them. His staring eyes proclaimed an agony of terror. At dawn the wing was to be fired. He had carefully provided against premature discovery. His friends would be still sleeping off their liquor. He saw himself lost.

He writhed, his lips worked, but the inexorable gag prevented articulation. The two carried him into the farther room, laid him face upwards on the bed, and bound him firmly to the four posts. The moonlight, streaming through the window, threw a ghastly pallor upon his countenance. His eyes pled for mercy, and Burton, after a few moments' hesitation, relented. If the terror-stricken wretch would show any spark of good feeling, he would relieve his fears. He loosed the gag.

Schwikkard gulped, moistened his lips, and spoke gaspingly.

"You have me in your power ... but your revenge will recoil on you.... Release me; I will leave the château at once.... I will agree to any terms.... You shall go unharmed."

"You would bribe me?" answered Burton, coldly, disgusted that the man had said no word of regret. "You have given us no reason to believe that your word is more to be trusted than any other German's. We are not going to kill you, in spite of your threats to a helpless gentleman and your treatment of Madame. Your threats, perhaps, were not meant in earnest----"

"No, no," cried the German eagerly. "It was only--only a joke."

"Ah! such a joke is in very bad taste, so we will leave you to think it over."

Remorselessly he replaced the gag, and they left him to his reflections.

Returning to the invalid's room, they consulted in whispers. The captain had closed his eyes. Full of admiration for his self-control in giving no sign of having observed the stealthy approach from the door, Burton hoped that the wounded man might be strong enough to bear removal from the château to the curé's house, and thence to the British lines.

"Can we move him?" he asked Pierre.

"Ah, no, monsieur," replied the old man, bending over the bed and gazing with poignancy of affection at the haggard face. "It would kill him."

Burton pondered, while Pierre spoke gently to his master's son and poured wine between his lips. The captain's eyes were eloquent of gratitude.

"There is only one thing to be done," said Burton at last. "Our army is slowly advancing: we must hold the château until it comes."

"But, monsieur, it is impossible!" cried the old man. "The Bosches are in the house: they fill the village."

"True; but this wing is defensible against anything except artillery, and we have a valuable hostage in the major. Let us see what monsieur le marquis says."

They went to the room where they had left the old general and his wife. Burton explained to the former what he had already done, and what he proposed to do. There was a gleam in the old soldier's eyes.

"Ma foi, monsieur, la bonne idée!" he cried. "It makes me young again." Then he glanced at his wife, and his face was full of trouble. "Chérie," he said, "there will be danger. It will be no place for you. Will you not go to the curé's? It is dark: Pierre would lead you across the fields."

"Mon ami," replied the old lady firmly, taking the general's hand, "my place is with you and with Fernand. Is it for nothing that I am a soldier's wife?"

The marquis pressed her hand; his eyes were moist.

"Monsieur, it shall be," he said, simply, turning to Burton.

"Will you come with me then, monsieur?" said Burton. "Pierre, bring food

and candles from the kitchen, also a chisel if you have one."

The marquise returned to her son's room; Burton, accompanied by the general, made a rapid tour of the floor. The head of the kitchen staircase came to the passage near the door of the servant's bedroom in which the captain was now laid. The window of the room, overlooking the parterres in front of the house, was opposite the door. There were two doors, one on each side of the passage, opening into rooms both of which communicated with the bedroom. One of these had been temporarily occupied by monsieur and madame; in the other, Major Schwikkard was confined. At the farther end of the passage was a door opening on to a landing, from which the grand staircase descended to the hall below.

The general's experienced eye marked the possibilities of the situation.

"They will come up the grand staircase, monsieur," he said. "This door is our outer defence. We must barricade it. If they fire through it, their shots will fly straight along the passage to the door of my son's room. They will hardly penetrate that and the barricade that we shall raise behind it. The Germans will break down this door and come into the passage. We must then defend the rooms."

"And if they attack from the outside, monsieur?"

"The windows are shuttered. You observed that, and sent for a chisel--to loophole the shutters?"

"That was my idea."

"It was good. We must barricade the shutters also in such a way that we can approach the loopholes obliquely. Their Mauser bullets will easily penetrate the shutters, although they are of oak."

"Here is Pierre. We must be very quiet and very quick; the sentry below will wonder at the prolonged absence of his chief."

"Is there a sentry?"

"There was to be. I will see."

He tip-toed to the head of the grand staircase, and peeped over the rail. One of the orderlies was standing bolt upright against the door.

The three men removed their boots, and carried every portable piece of furniture to the doors and windows, piling them one upon another, and strutting them with chairs, towel horses, and other small objects. The chisel proved a useless tool for boring the hard oak. There was a fire in the captain's room. Burton made a poker red hot, and with this burnt a few loopholes in the shutters. After nearly an hour's strenuous work, carried on with extraordinary noiselessness, the preparations were made.

The old marquis was now trembling with excitement and fatigue. His wife gave him some wine, and, while he rested, Burton looked to the weapons. The German's revolver and his own were full. The marquise brought out two more, a rifle, and ammunition, from the depths of a cupboard.

There was now only to await events. It was nearly midnight. How long would it be before the sentry became uneasy at his commander's absence? With German stolidity, and the Prussian soldier's fear of his officer, he might never think of moving from his post. But after a time he would certainly be relieved, and possibly a consultation with the relief would lead to action.

As Burton sat nursing the rifle, he was conscious of a smell of burning, distinct from the smell caused by boring the wood. Pierre had been absent for some little time in the room where the major lay. He came through the communicating door, followed by smoke. Burton started up.

"Have they set the place on fire already?" he asked.

"No, no, monsieur," the man replied, with a strange smile. "I was merely burning some paper."

Thinking that there were perhaps some documents which must not fall into the Germans' hands, Burton asked no further questions. Once or twice again the same grim smile appeared about the old servitor's lips, and Burton concluded that he was pleased at having accomplished a necessary task.

Two hours passed in almost silent waiting. The only movements were those of the marquise in tending her son. Then, about two o'clock, they heard some one try the handle of the door at the end of the passage. Burton had locked it. In a moment there was a tap at the door. No one answered. It was repeated, louder and more energetically. Burton nodded to Pierre.

"What is it?" the man asked in German.

"The Herr Major; is he here?"

"Yes; he is resting; he must not be disturbed."

Footsteps were heard receding. The sentry was apparently satisfied.

"We must give them warning some time before dawn," said Burton, "otherwise the man Vossling will carry out his orders, and set fire to the staircase."

"Knowing that the major is in this wing?" said the general.

"He may not know that. On the other hand he may. Then he will suspect that something is wrong. In the one case, we should be burnt alive; in the other, the man would be uneasy and come to wake the major. But the longer we delay the more chance of relief. The sun rises at about half-past six; the place was to be fired before dawn. How will the orderly interpret his instructions?"

"It is a nice calculation," said the marquis, who with renewed strength had recovered his keenness. "Will he wait until the darkness begins to thin, or abstain from setting up a rival to the sunlight? I do not know the German mind."

Time dragged for Burton. The marquis and his man dozed; the marquise, in the intervals of her ministrations, read a book of Hours. The slow clock ticked on the mantelshelf; three struck, and four.

At a little after four there was a loud knock on the door.

"At last!" said Burton, half in relief, half in misgiving. The old men started up, and grasped each a revolver. The lady put down her book and clasped her hands on her lap, pressing her lips together as if to shut in a cry.

"Who is there?" demanded Burton in French.

"Where is Major Schwikkard?" came the answer. An officer was speaking.

Burton saw that further concealment was useless.

"He is here," he called down the passage, "a prisoner."

The German swore.

"You dogs! You imbeciles!" he shouted, shaking the door. "Let me in. What do you mean by this buffoonery? If it is your trick, you white-headed old fool, you shan't escape hanging because you were once a soldier. You and your man are civilians in arms. You shall die by inches. Let me in, I say."

There was no reply. The officer shook the door again.

"Force it with your shoulder, Vossling," he said with an oath.

The door creaked, but the lock held. Next moment there was a crash; he had blown in the lock with a shot from his revolver. But the door banged against the wardrobe placed behind it. The German swore again. Then there was silence. In a few minutes, several voices were heard.

"Remove this barricade, you old French fools," said the captain, in a voice thick with sleep, wine and rage, "or we will blow the place to atoms."

"And Major Schwikkard?" said Burton, quietly.

"That is not an old man speaking," said the captain to his companions. "There was no one else in the house except the old hag and the wounded man."

"And the deaf mute," said one of the others.

"Potztausend! If that dirty fellow has played tricks on us I will crop his ears and cut his tongue out. Give them a taste."

Their revolvers spoke; three shots crashed through the wood, flew along the passage, through the open door opposite, and finally embedded themselves in the shutter. A moment later Burton, stepping to the edge of the doorway, lifted his rifle and fired. There was a cry from beyond the barricaded door, a volley of oaths, and a general stampede for safety to the landing.

For a few minutes there was silence. The marquise stroked her son's hot brow. Then a fusillade burst through the door and the stout barricade behind it. The bullets pattered on the shutters, but the three men had stood back out of the line of fire. None of them was struck by a shot, but a splinter of wood from the wardrobe glanced off the inner door ami grazed Pierre's cheek. Again and again the fusillade was repeated. The defenders, husbanding their ammunition, and careful not to expose themselves, did not reply; they waited in grim silence, to meet the enemy's next move.

The failure of their efforts enraged and nonplussed the Germans. Warned

by the shot that had wounded one of them, they made no attempt to storm the barricade. There was a short interval, and they were heard discussing the situation in low tones. The result was made clear in a few minutes. Bullets began to crash through the shutters to all the windows.

"They have brought up men from the village, and surrounded the wing," said the general.

"We shall be in no danger," said Burton. "Firing from the ground, their shots will go through the ceilings."

In a short time this became apparent to the assailants. The attack ceased for a little; then, through the window of the room in which the major lay, bullets flew horizontally across the room, a few inches above his head.

"They will kill their own officer!" cried Burton. "We can't leave him helpless in his present position."

"He deserves no pity," said the general. "Still, we are not Germans. My camp bed is there, lower than the bed he is on, and easily moved. Let us place him on that."

"Mon Dieu! It is the bed you slept on in '70, monsieur," cried Pierre.

"What then, my friend?"

"It is sacrilege, monsieur; it is treason to France--pardon, mon maitre, I should not have said that, but it would tear my heart to see a German on that bed."

"Let that be our *revanche*," said the general, quietly.

"I hope a German bullet may find him," muttered the old man, as the others released the stiff figure upon the bed. They kept on their knees to avoid the flying bullets, and so transferred the German from the larger bedstead to the low single bed on which the general had made the campaign of '70. They placed it against the wall in the corner near the window, out of danger. Leaving Pierre on his knees to fire up if any German tried to enter the room through the window, they returned to the invalid's bedroom.

"Strange that they should be so reckless of killing their own officer," remarked Burton.

"They are callous ruffians," the general replied. "Besides, it is war; one life is of little account. That is what we all have to remember. The individual life is nothing; the cause is all."

The passage and the rooms were filling with suffocating fumes. The noise of shots, of splintering wood, of shouting men, was incessant. Hitherto, save for the single rifle shot fired by Burton, the defenders had not used their weapons. At the end of the passage they could not have escaped the hail of bullets; from the side doors they could not take direct aim. But the attack had now become so violent that reprisals must be attempted, or the defences would be utterly shattered. An

idea came suddenly to Burton. Closing the door leading to the sick man's room, so that the passage was completely dark, he passed into the next room, shoved a table through the doorway, set a chair upon it, and waiting until there was a slight lull in the attack, climbed upon the chair.

Standing thus above the enemy's line of fire, and in darkness, he was able to see, through the gaps made in the barricade and the door, a faint light filtering through from the lamp in the hall below. A crowd of Germans had come quite close to the door, and were thrusting their rifles through the jagged rents in the panels. Burton took careful aim at one of them, fired, and a yell proclaimed that his bullet had gone home. A second shot claimed its victim. Then the enemy, cursing with rage, rushed back from the door, and for a time continued firing from the angles of the landing.

Meanwhile the window at which Pierre was left had been driven in, shutter and all, by repeated blows of an axe wielded by a man mounted on a ladder. The old man fired just as the German was stepping from the ladder to the window-sill. Shot through the heart, the intruder fell headlong. None of his comrades was bold enough to emulate his daring.

The general had been chafing at his inability to take a positive part in the fight. Stimulated by the success Burton had had from his post of vantage, the old warrior's Gallic spirit threw aside caution. Slipping into the passage, he was in the act of placing another chair on the table when a bullet fired from the angle on the landing struck a brass bracket on the wall at his left, rebounded from it, and buried itself with a splinter of brass in the old man's arm. He reeled. Burton sprang down to assist him, and carried him fainting into the bedroom, where his wife received him into her arms.

[image]

The marquis is hit

"Hard luck!" thought Burton, for the shot that wounded the general was the last to be fired for a considerable time.

VI

The enemy ceased firing, both within the château and without. Wondering what

their next move would be, Burton remained heedfully on guard, rifle in hand. Pierre, overcome with grief at the collapse of his master, was assisting the marquise to restore him and to bind up his wound.

Presently the German's voice came through the door.

"General du Breuil!"

"What do you want?" Burton called.

"You treacherous hound! I have nothing to say to you," cried the German, angrily. "I speak to the general."

"The general deputes me to answer for him. If you will not speak to me, you will go unanswered."

"Who are you?" the German asked with an oath.

"The general's deputy," replied Burton.

"That will not avail you," cried the officer, sneeringly. "I have sent to the village to fetch that rascally smith who assisted your imposture. When he has told me who you are, he shall be deaf and dumb for his last minute in life."

Burton felt chill from top to toe. He had not thought of the peril in which his stratagem might involve the smith. The Germans were capable of any enormity. But he could do nothing--except gain time. Would the British advance guard arrive before all was lost?

"Well, if the general chooses to employ a cur as his deputy, so be it," the German went on. "Like man, like master. Take this message to the general: If he does not yield, I will fire the château."

"And if we surrender?" said Burton.

"We will deal with him as a soldier. He will be tried by court-martial."

"On what charge?"

"That, having been a soldier, with no excuse of ignorance of the laws of war, he, as a civilian, resists the military power."

"And if he is found guilty?"

"His fate will lie in the discretion of the court."

"And his old servant?"

The German, anxious to gain his ends without further fighting, hesitated, then replied, equivocally--

"The court will decide."

"And myself?"

"The court will decide," replied the officer, impatiently.

"Is that all?"

The German smote the door angrily.

"Your answer!" he cried.

"You will give us a few minutes for consultation?"

"Five minutes: no more."

Burton stood on his chair, holding his rifle.

"I heard it, monsieur," said the voice of the marquise in an undertone behind him. "My poor husband is incapable of speech. We must leave all to you. But can we resist fire?"

"Madame, I seek to gain time. We can expect no mercy from the Germans. There is but one hope--that our army will arrive in time. If that hope fails----"

"Spare us fire, monsieur, I implore you. It is frightful."

She wrung her hands piteously.

"Trust me, madame; hope, and pray," said Burton.

When the five minutes were up, the German hailed him. "Your answer--quickly."

"Monsieur le capitaine," said Burton, suavely, "we cannot surrender yet. We should like to kill a few more Germans."

The officer let out a vicious oath.

"Then roast!" he cried. "You and the rest."

"Including your worthy commandant, mon capitaine? Don't forget him."

"You have murdered him."

"That is the explanation of their reckless shooting," thought Burton. He replied: "Not at all. We are not Germans."

"You lie!" cried the captain, whose anger was rapidly getting the better of him.

"Did I not remind you, monsieur, that we are not Germans?"

The officer was speechless with rage. Burton imagined his quandary. It would be awkward for him if he set fire to the château and burnt his superior. His next words showed his state of mind.

"You say Major Schwikkard is alive. Prove it."

"Nothing easier, mon capitaine," said Burton. "You must give me a few minutes. He is a heavy man."

He saw that there was nothing to lose, possibly something to gain, by convincing the German. Slipping down from his perch, he hurried to Pierre, who was kneeling at his master's chair.

"Come with me," he said, and led him into the room where the major lay gagged and bound. The bed was a light one. They carried it to the window, and tilted it on end. Leaving Pierre to maintain it in that position, Burton returned to the chair, and kept silence until the captain impatiently demanded his proofs.

"I must trouble you to descend and go to the rear of the wing, monsieur," said Burton. "It is dark: no doubt you have a flashlight?"

"We have; what then? Do not play with me."

"Far from it, monsieur. I am aware of the gravity of your position. Go down to the garden at the rear, and look up at the window that will then face you. But do not flash your light up until I give the word."

The German snarled under his breath. Burton caught the sounds of a whispered consultation at the stair-head. A minute or two later the officer called up from the garden. Burton withdrew the piled-up furniture, opened the shutters, and helped Pierre to lift the bed, tilted as it was, to the window. The major's form, stretched upon it, somewhat resembled a mummy in a case.

"Now, monsieur!" Burton called.

The glaring light of an acetylene lamp was thrown up towards the window. It fell on the major's face, which, ghastly in itself, looked death-like in the glare.

"He is dead!" the captain shouted.

"Not at all--only afraid; he overheard your amiable intentions. We will demonstrate." He turned to Pierre, saying: "Fetch some pepper."

"There is none upstairs, monsieur. I dare not go below."

"Some snuff?"

"Ah, oui! monsieur le marquis likes his pinch. A moment, monsieur."

He went into the bedroom, took a snuff-box from his master's pocket, and returned. Burton opened the box, took a large pinch of snuff, and held it to the major's nose. There was a slight but dramatic pause. All was silent. Then the major's features became convulsed, and the silence was rent by a resounding sneeze.

"Now, monsieur le capitaine," cried Burton, "could a dead German sneeze like that?"

There were snarls of rage from below, mingled, Burton thought, with suppressed laughter from some of the troopers who had gathered in the background behind their officers.

"With your good pleasure we will resume our interesting conversation above," said Burton.

With Pierre he lowered the bed and carried it back to its former position. Then he replaced the shutters.

"Another ten minutes gained," he thought.

The ten minutes were prolonged to fifteen. The captain was consulting with his subordinates. Presently he called through the door--

"Are you there?"

"Always at your service, monsieur."

"Seeing that Major Schwikkard is apparently alive, we will permit you to surrender on terms."

"What terms, monsieur?"

"You shall be allowed to pass through the German lines."

"I should like to consult the general, monsieur," said Burton, still talking to

gain time.

"Five minutes."

"Let us say ten, monsieur," Burton pleaded. "It is, you will admit, a serious matter."

"Ten, then; not a minute more."

At the end of the ten minutes the captain called for an answer.

"The general wishes to know, monsieur, what guarantee he has for safety."

"The word of a German officer," snarled the captain. "Be quick!"

Waiting a minute or so, Burton said--

"The general has a little difficulty in making up his mind--pardonable at his age. You give him another ten minutes, monsieur?"

"Three; not a second more," cried the German, completely hoodwinked by Burton's tone, and unaware of the vital consideration in Burton's mind--the return of Captain Rolfe to head-quarters.

"Very well, monsieur. I will bring the general's answer in three minutes."

The marquise and Pierre were holding their breath. The same thought possessed them both; to what lengths would this audacious Englishman go?

The period elapsed; the captain called peremptorily for an answer.

"The general, monsieur, has considered your offer," said Burton, "and he feels safer where he is."

At last the German's besotted intelligence was penetrated by the suspicion that he had been played with. He poured out his venom in a torrent of virulent abuse, snatched at his revolver, and fired point-blank into the darkness. The bullet struck one of the legs of Burton's chair, the chair broke under him, and he fell with a crash. The effect of the shot, heard but not seen by the Germans, was hailed by them with a shout of triumph. But Burton crawled into the bedroom, with no worse injury than bruised elbows and shins.

VII

Into the next few minutes were crowded, as it seemed to Burton in reminiscence, the events of hours. Emboldened by the supposed success of the captain's shot, the Germans renewed the attack with great violence and determination, both within and without. Repeated onslaughts were made on the tottering door, which was now almost completely splintered, and on the barricade of furniture behind it. Burton had lost no time in replacing the broken chair, and twice his steady fire from near the ceiling sent the attackers back in a disorderly heap.

Meanwhile two of the windows and their shutters had been riddled by long-distance fire, and men were again mounting on ladders to break into the rooms. At one, Pierre played a manful part; at the other, the general, bracing himself as the peril grew greater, stood holding his revolver in his left hand, and shot man after man.

The grey light of early morning was now stealing into the room, depriving the defenders of the advantage of darkness. The shouts of the men, the reports of the guns, the suffocating fumes, made the place an inferno. At the bedside the marquise still bravely held her post. Burton was too busy to notice the extreme pallor of her face, the trembling of her hands, the agonised look of terror in her eyes.

With a wild shout the infuriated Germans crashed through the broken door, and began to pull away the barricade at the end of the passage. While they were doing so, it was impossible for their comrades to continue firing; the attack was interrupted, and Burton shot down many of the enemy among the pile of shattered furniture. But he recognised that, the Germans having won an entrance to the passage, it was only a question of minutes before the defence was overwhelmed.

At this moment he heard a groan in his rear. Pierre, badly hit, had staggered from the window he had been defending through the communicating doorway into the invalid's room. "It is all over with me!" he moaned, sinking at his mistress's feet. The crack of the general's revolver still sounded at short intervals from the next room. Here and there the woodwork was smouldering; before long it would burst into flames.

"There is only one thing to be done," thought Burton, resolved to maintain the struggle to the end, desperate as the position was. "We must keep together, and make a last stand at the captain's bed."

Filling his magazine, he poured shot after shot into the enemy crowding in the doorway and bursting through the barrier. The survivors reeled back under this withering fire, giving Burton time to leap from his perch, run into the room, and call the general to his side. Pierre was helpless, the invalid was half dead, only the general and Burton remained to stem a tide which would soon flow back with tenfold force along the passage.

The two men posted themselves before the bed, ready to meet the final rush. Unknown to them, the marquise had taken the revolver from Pierre's hand and stood in front of her son, like a lioness defending her cub. The attack was renewed simultaneously on all sides, but a strange inadvertence on the part of the enemy intervened to deal a partial check. They were shooting from the demolished barricade at the end of the passage. At the same time their comrades outside had begun to fire through the window in a direct line with it. Several of the Germans in the passage fell to the bullets of their own friends.

Growling at this mishap, the unwounded men broke through the doors at the sides into the rooms. Burton had closed and barricaded, as well as he could, the communicating doors, but he felt with a sinking heart that a few seconds would bring the unequal contest to its inevitable end.

The din was terrific, and with it was now mingled a surprising sound from outside the house.

"A machine-gun!" said Burton to himself. "They will shatter their own men!" He had no more time to think about it. The door of the room to his left fell in with a crash; in the glimmer of dawn the opening was crowded with Germans. Burton and the general emptied their revolvers into the mass; it collapsed, and the two men hastily filled their chambers to meet the next, the final rush.

[image]

THE DOOR FELL IN WITH A CRASH

But there was a strange lull in the rifle fire. From outside again came the rattle of a machine-gun, and, in a momentary interval of silence, Burton caught the sound of cheers. Surely they were not German cheers? He thrilled with the conviction that the voices this time had the true British ring. He waited the expected rush; it did not come. The doorway was clear; heavy feet were trampling in frenzied haste along the passage. With the intermittent rattle of machine-guns close at hand came unmistakable British shouts.

Burton rushed to the window. The shutters were now in flames. Wrenching away the bars, he thrust his head through the shattered glass, and joyfully hailed the khaki-clad Lancers who had reined up below. There was not a living German to be seen. The greensward and the trampled parterres were strewn with prostrate forms. And with a rattle and clank a battery of horse artillery galloped upon the scene.

"We are saved, madame!" cried Burton, turning back into the room. "Our Lancers have put the Germans to flight."

"Dieu merci!" murmured the lady, falling on her knees at the bedside.

"Ah, les braves Anglais!" said the marquis, grasping Burton's right hand with his left, and jerking his arm up and down like a pump handle.

They looked at old Pierre, who had raised himself, and was feebly shouting: "Vivent les Anglais! Vive monsieur le sourd-muet!"

Then, to Burton's amazement, he cracked his fingers, and laughed like a lunatic.

"The poor fellow's brain is turned," said the marquis.

"No, no, monsieur, I am not crazy. Ah, ah! it was a trick to play!"

"What are you raving about, mon vieux?" asked the marquis.

"The smoke, monsieur! The paper! I gave the spy Schwikkard a foretaste. Ha! Surely he believed his last hour was come. See, monsieur, I burnt some brown paper in the stove under his nose. He would fire the château! Eh bien! assuredly he believed it was already on fire. It was drôle, monsieur--fine trick, n'est-ce pas?"

"Schwikkard is our prisoner, without doubt," said Burton to the marquis. "Shall we untie him?"

At this moment entered Major Colpus of the Lancers, stepping gingerly over the wreck of door and furniture.

"A pretty mess they have made of it," he said, with double intent. "You are Burton?"

"That's my name."

"Captain Rolfe told us we should catch a half-regiment of hussars if we hurried. He rather expected you would be a prisoner. We got to the village just as some of the Germans were hauling away one Boitelet, the village smith, it appears. They left him to us, and he gave us an inkling that you were concerned in the rumpus here. The Germans have skedaddled; we have a few prisoners below. You have had a whack or two, I see."

"I wasn't aware of it," said Burton, looking with surprise at dark stains on his blouse. "The marquis and his man are both wounded."

"Glad to meet you, monsieur," said the officer, who, with British shyness, had affected to ignore the presence of all but Burton. Now, however, he greeted monsieur and madame courteously, knelt down and rendered capable first-aid to the marquis and Pierre, and seeing at a glance that the man in bed was very ill, dispatched Burton for the regimental medico.

It was not until the doctor was engaged with his patients that Burton found an opportunity of releasing Major Schwikkard, and handing him as a prisoner to the British officer. He was scarcely recognisable. The long vigil, with the dread of being roasted by his own instructions, had broken him both in body and mind. He looked years older. His cheeks had fallen in, his whole frame shook, and his hair was patched with white. When Major Colpus addressed him cheerily, he stammered, tried to complete a sentence, and burst into tears.

"Poor wretch!" the major murmured. "Doctor, here's another patient for you. Now, Mr. Burton, come and tell me all that has happened."

"I want to get back to my aeroplane," protested Burton.

"No hurry for that. Your friend, the smith, has borrowed a spare mount, and ridden off to the town to fetch something or other for it. I shan't let you off."

Burton growled that there was not much to tell, and turned to take his leave of the old marquis and his wife. In their over-flowing emotion they could hardly

speak.

"God bless you, monsieur!" said the marquise, brokenly. "You have saved us all. Your doctor says that my son will recover. Take a mother's thanks, and wear this, monsieur. May the good God preserve you!"

She took from her neck a chain bearing a richly jewelled cross, and pressed it into Burton's hand. He bade them good-bye.

"Adieu, monsieur!" said old Pierre, as Burton shook hands with him. "The wound--it is nothing. Your good doctor has stitched it up. I was not born to be killed by a Bosche. Ah, ça! It was a good trick, monsieur, n'est-ce pas?"

[image]

Chapter III Heading

BORROWED PLUMES

I

The tramp steamer *Elpinike*, bound from the Peiræus to the island of Tenedos with supplies for the Allied forces, was thrashing its way northwards through the blue waters of the Ægean Sea. It was a warm, sunny day; the Levantine crew lolled on the bulwarks, and a mixed group of passengers was gathered on the after-deck. Three or four French officers, smoking cigarettes, basked on deck-chairs; several men, whose nationality it were hard to determine, leant in picturesque attitudes against the wall of the deck-house; and a couple of Englishmen, wearing overalls and low cloth caps, and with blackened briar pipes between their lips, sat side by side on the third of the steps leading to the bridge. They eyed with faint amusement the centre of the group, a very fat man sucking a very fat cigar, who lay back in his creaking deck-chair and discoursed at large.

Mr. Achilles Christopoulos, as he had announced himself to his fellow-passengers, was the agent of the charterers of the vessel. He was, he assured them, a very busy man. He had broad, bulging, swarthy cheeks, a multiple chin, and a heavier moustache than is common among his compatriots; for Mr. Christopoulos

was, by his own account, a Greek of Greeks. His English was fluent, with little oddities of accent and pronunciation; and after every few words he drew deep, audible gasps for breath.

"Yes, zhentlemen," said Mr. Christopoulos, waving his cigar towards the Englishmen and Frenchmen, "my country will remain neutral. Of war we have had enough; it is time we had a rest. And tell me, why should we pull your chestnuts out of ze fire? Tell me zat? What did you do to help us against ze Turks twenty years ago? Nozink. And two years ago? Nozink. We are nozink to you. We wait; zat is our policy; and when ze time comes, why, zen we show ze world we do not forget our history."

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed one of the Frenchmen, flinging a half-smoked cigarette into the sea. "You are egoist, monsieur. Your history--vat? I zink of Pericles; I zink of your patriots since a hundred years. Ah! zat vas not zeir policy."

"But ze time has changed, monsieur. Pericles, he is dead. Ze German Emperor, he is alive."

"Conspuez-le!" said the Frenchman.

Mr. Christopoulos smiled.

"Consider with calmness, zhentlemen," he said, as though appealing from the excitable Frenchmen to the more stolid English. "Ze Turk, with ze German Emperor at ze back, is to-day a new man. Ze King of ze Hellenes knows ze power of Germany. He runs no risks. We have men who are ignorant, who do not zink. Zey make a fuss, cry for war; ze king knows it is foolish, and holds tight ze reins. Greece owes much to Germany, and shall owe more."

The French officers burst into angry declamation. The Englishmen, who had taken no part in the conversation, listened for a few minutes longer, then got up and strolled along the deck.

"Talks too much, Teddy," said one of them.

"Let 'em talk," replied the other.

Edward Burton, of the Flying Corps, after several months' exhausting service in France, had been invalided home. On reporting himself at headquarters after his convalescence, he was ordered to the Dardanelles. Taking a P. and O. steamer for Alexandria, he had met on board an old friend, Dick Hunter, who had recently come into the corps from a line regiment, as observer. The supply ship in which they took passage at Alexandria had put into Athens with a broken shaft, and to save time they had joined the *Elpinike* at the moment of her leaving port.

The *Elpinike* was very old, very dirty, very smelly, and very slow, plodding along at seven or eight knots. The two airmen, accustomed to easy and rapid flights, were thoroughly weary of the voyage by the time the vessel reached harbour. They found themselves there in the midst of intense activity, reminding Burton of the bustle and orderly confusion at the bases in France. They reported

themselves at headquarters, only to learn that, pending the arrival of new machines from England, there was no seaplane ready for them, and they had to resign themselves to kicking their heels for a time. There was, however, plenty to interest them. Troops--British, French, and Colonial--were continually arriving from Egypt and departing on transports for the Dardanelles. Warships came and went; airmen were present who had reconnoitred for the fleet in the attacks on the forts, and to discover the strength of the Turks on both sides of the strait. These retailed their experiences for the benefit of their comrades newly arrived, who grew more and more eager to set to work.

Now and then they ran up against Mr. Christopoulos, who was quartered near them, and found it a little difficult to shake off that garrulous man of business. He showed a disposition, they thought, to presume on the acquaintance made during the voyage from the Peiræus. As a rule they gave only perfunctory acknowledgments of his greetings; sometimes they were unable to escape him.

"You are still idle, zhentlemen?" he said one day. "Zere is a shortage of aircraft, I hear. How provoking!"

"It gives us time to get acclimatised," said Burton.

"Zat is true. It is very fine air. You like ze wine of ze country? It is very fine. You know, of course, zat here came ze fleet from my country for ze siege of Troy. Ah! we Greeks were ten years taking Troy, and I zink you will be ten years taking Constantinople."

"Let's hope not," said Burton. "Your ancestors hadn't aeroplanes, you see. Our planes will be even more useful than the Wooden Horse."

"Perhaps. And when do you expect to get to work?"

"All in good time."

"You will go to Enos, perhaps?"

"We shall go wherever we are sent. You'll go back to Athens in the *Elpinike* to-morrow, I suppose?"

"No. My business keeps me here. I am a very busy man."

He went on to describe some of his activities, and the Englishmen, breaking away at last, made but a cool response to his genial "Au revoir, zhentlemen."

It was ten days before their seaplane arrived. The engine required very little tuning up. They made a few trial trips, to accustom themselves to the atmospheric conditions of the Ægean Sea, and looked forward to an early call to action.

On returning to their quarters one night, they were surprised to see a British sentry at the door of the house where Mr. Christopoulos lodged.

"What's up?" asked Hunter, stopping.

"Got orders to guard this house, sir," replied the man.

"What for?"

"A party of us was sent to arrest the chap that lives here, sir--the fat Greek

Christopoulos. Don't know what he's been doing; swindling somebody, perhaps."

"Did you get him?"

"No, sir. He can't be found."

They passed on, and, after changing, went to the restaurant for their evening meal. There they learnt that Mr. Christopoulos was suspected of spying. It appeared that he must have got wind of the order for his arrest, and had decamped; but his disappearance was a mystery, for no vessel had left the island since the morning, with the exception of a small country sailing-boat. It was conjectured that he had left on one of the small craft engaged in bringing provisions to the base; but though several of these had been overhauled at sea by fast despatch boats, no trace of the fugitive was discovered.

Two days later the airmen were summoned to headquarters.

"Your machine is in order?" asked the staff-officer.

"Yes, sir--ready for anything," Burton replied.

"Then you'll ship on board the ----." He named a cruiser lying in the harbour. "There are rumours of a large Turkish concentration at Keshan. You'll find out if they are true. The cruiser will take you up to the Gulf of Saros, and you will start your flight from the neighbourhood of the coast somewhere south of Enos. The cruiser will await your return."

They hurried down to the harbour. The seaplane was slung on board the cruiser, which steamed away northward, through the huge armada of British and French war-vessels, transports, and supply ships that thronged the sea. It was an open secret that the preparations for a combined attack by land and sea were far advanced. They heard the distant boom of heavy guns, which grew louder and more continuous as they neared the mouth of the strait. When they opened up the headland of Suvla Burun the course was altered a few points to the east, and another hour's steaming across the Gulf of Saros found them some five miles from the coast, off Kurukli. Here the cruiser hove-to, and the seaplane was slung out.

The captain had already given the airmen their bearings. North-west lay Enos and the river Maritza, with the Bulgarian port of Dedeagatch beyond. Keshan, their objective, was to the north-east, about thirty miles distant from the coast.

"I will cruise about for four or five hours," said the captain, "keeping well out to sea, out of range of the batteries in the Bulair lines yonder." He pointed due east to the neck of the Gallipoli peninsula. "You have plenty of petrol?"

"Enough for the job," replied Burton.

"Well, good luck to you. 'Ware shrapnel."

They slipped over the side into their places. Burton started the engine, and, after skimming the surface for a few moments, the seaplane rose like a bird and soared away, ever higher, towards the coast northward.

II

The sky was clear, the air calm--an ideal day for airmen. In a few minutes they passed over the rocky and precipitous line of the coast and pursued their flight inland. Hunter, closely scanning the country beneath through his glasses, presently exclaimed, "A gun!" and shortly afterwards, "A battery!" The guns were cleverly concealed from observation from the sea, behind a cliff, marked by a clump of the dense brushwood that flourishes on the shores of the Gulf of Saros. Hunter expected a shot or two from the gunners, but they made no sign, probably unwilling to reveal their position to the warships in the bay. They were saving their shot for more serious work than firing at seaplanes.

Northward they saw a river flowing east and west. Passing over a village--Kiskapan, according to the map--they crossed the river almost at right angles with its course, and beyond a range of low hills discovered their objective about five miles away. They had travelled some thirty-five miles by dead reckoning, which corresponded with the estimated distance from the cruiser.

Before they obtained a full view of Keshan itself they perceived evidences of a considerable concentration of troops. At several points around the town there were extensive encampments. Clouds of dust to the north, east, and north-east betrayed the movements of troops or convoys. And when they were still about two miles from the town they heard the familiar rattle of machine-guns and the long crackle of rifle fire. But they were too high up to feel any anxiety, and while Burton wheeled round and round in an extensive circle, Hunter busily plotted out on his map the positions of the camps, and made notes of the directions of the movements, the estimated number of the battalions, and the nature of their arms.

After a while Burton began gradually to drop, in order to give Hunter a chance of recognising gun emplacements. At about two thousand feet the enemy opened fire. White and creamy puffs of shrapnel floated and spread in the air. A shell burst some distance beneath them, another above them, and soon the machine was cleaving its way through a thin cloud of pungent smoke. It appeared that at least six guns were at work.

"Better get out of this," shouted Hunter. "I've got about enough information."

"We'll go a little farther north," replied Burton, "to see if any reinforcements are coming up towards Keshan."

"All right, but go a bit higher; I heard two or three smacks on the planes just now."

Rising a little higher, Burton swept round to the north. In a minute or two Hunter was able to see that the hill track from Rodosto was choked with transport of all kinds. Right and left, every possible route from Constantinople and Adri-

anople was equally congested. It was clear that a vast army was being concentrated within striking distance of Gallipoli, and on the flank of any force moving eastward from Enos or any other point of disembarkation.

Burton then headed west towards the Maritza, intending to return by way of Enos and discover, if possible, what force the Turks had available for the defence of that place. They were passing somewhat to the north of Keshan, to keep out of the way of the batteries, when Hunter suddenly caught sight of an object like a large bird low down in the sky on their left hand. A few moments' scrutiny through his glasses confirmed the suspicions which had seized him on the instant.

"An aviatik, coming our way," he called.

"Won't catch us," responded Burton with a smile.

"Stay and fight it?"

"It's tempting, but we mustn't. It won't do to run risks when our job's to collect information."

Hunter acquiesced with a sigh. Burton shifted his course a point or two to the west, so as to run nearly parallel with the enemy's aeroplane.

A moment or two later he gave a start of alarm.

"What's the matter?" asked Hunter.

"Afraid there's a leak. The petrol gauge is falling faster than it ought. They must have knocked a hole in the tank. See if you can find it."

Hunter twisted in his seat, bent over, and began to examine the tank.

"Can't find any leak," he said presently. "If there's one, it's out of reach. How's the gauge?"

"At this rate we shall be done in another ten minutes."

"Whew! How much farther to go?"

"At least twenty miles, perhaps more. I wish we had come straight. There's absolutely no chance of getting back before the petrol gives out. Where's the enemy?"

"Still on our port side, going strong. It looks as if she means to chase us, thinking we're running away. We shall have to fight now, shan't we?"

"Yes. We're bound to come down in a few minutes, and if we don't tackle her at once it's all up with us. How far is she off?"

"About a couple of miles, I think, and about the same height. Her course is between us and Enos, worse luck!"

"Wish we had a machine-gun! I'll come round; take a shot when we're within range, and for goodness' sake cripple her."

He brought the seaplane round in an easy curve, at the same time climbing to get above the enemy. His eye was all the time on the rapidly falling gauge. The aviatik held on its course for a little, then wheeled to the south-west, as if to cut the seaplane off. It was clear that the enemy airmen had no wish to avoid a fight.

Burton's wheeling movement had now made his course almost due east, so that the two machines were rushing obliquely towards each other at the rate of about a hundred miles an hour. When they crossed, Burton was slightly ahead of the enemy, and, to his surprise, somewhat lower. At almost the same moment Hunter and the enemy's observer opened fire with their rifles, but each was handicapped by the fact that he was firing from right to left, and no damage seemed to have been done on either side. As soon as Burton had passed the enemy, he banked his machine and wheeled to the left, climbing as rapidly as possible to make good the deficiency in height. The aviatik also made a spiral movement to the left, with the result that in a few seconds the machines were once more converging on each other. This time, however, Burton was slightly to the rear of the enemy, and when their tracks crossed, he shot up behind it on its left. The aviatik, a second or two too late, made a desperate effort to edge away eastward, but the movement only brought the two planes closer together.

"We can't stick it another minute," gasped Burton.

Hunter did not reply. He had dropped his rifle and seized his automatic pistol. The machines were at point-blank range. Hunter fired. The enemy's observer screwed himself round in his seat to reply. Aiming at the pilot, Hunter sent a stream of bullets from his pistol. The pilot fell forward. For a moment the aeroplane rocked and seemed on the point of capsizing. Then the observer seized the controls, and, with a recklessness that bespoke inexperience or want of skill, began a perilously steep volplané.

[image]

An aerial somersault

Hunter looked down. The machine was rapidly dropping towards the edge of the lake a little to the east of the Maritza River. Suddenly, while yet some distance from the ground, the aviatik's descent was averted, possibly by an air pocket over the lake. For a moment it seemed poised without motion, then it turned a somersault. The observer fell out, and dropped into the lake at the same instant as the machine crashed on to the bank.

Meanwhile Burton had circled round. His tank was nearly empty. He must either come down or fall down. There was no sign of life in the wrecked aeroplane; the observer had disappeared in the water; no one was in sight. Swinging round again Burton adjusted his elevator so as to descend on the lake, and in a few seconds the seaplane was resting on the surface within thirty yards of the spot where the aviatik lay, a mangled heap, on the bank.

III

"We can wade ashore," said Burton. "I can see the bottom."

"Hadn't we better mend the leak?" Hunter suggested.

"But I want to see if the German has any spare petrol. We've lost a lot."

They waded through a foot or two of water, and examined the wreck. One of the wings was crumpled up; otherwise the machine had suffered little injury. The pilot, a fair-haired German of Saxon type, was dead. There was plenty of petrol in the tank, and Hunter drew this off into a tin can while Burton returned to the seaplane, pulled it ashore, and set about discovering the leak. It turned out to be a long thin crack on the underside of the tank.

"How on earth are we to mend this?" said Burton, looking at it ruefully.

"Why not stuff it up with mud?" said Hunter. "This stuff at the edge of the lake seems to be clayey, and it will harden in no time."

"Good! It may last for the few miles we have still to cover. Just keep a lookout while I work at it."

Hunter went up the bank. A rough bridle-track skirted the lake and disappeared in a plantation that came down to within about a hundred yards of the water. To the south the view was shut in by a wooded knoll. There was neither man nor house in sight.

Burton had just kneaded some clay for stopping up the crack when they heard shouts in the distance, apparently from a southward direction. He ran up and joined Hunter, and they went together to the knoll some hundred and twenty yards away, from which they expected to get a view of the southern shore and perhaps of the men from whom the cries came. They were careful to keep under cover, and, on arriving at the knoll, lay flat on the ground. As they had hoped, they could now see a large portion of the lake which had previously been hidden from them, and caught glimpses, on the western side, of the bridle-track here and there among the trees. At intervals it disappeared behind slight hillocks or denser stretches of the plantation.

For a minute or two they saw no human beings. The sounds had ceased. But presently, about a third of a mile away to the south, they caught sight of a party of half a dozen horsemen searching the shore of the lake, now trotting into the wood, now riding at the edge of the water, now cantering along the bridle-track in the direction of the Englishmen.

"Turks!" murmured Burton.

"They must have seen the machines fall," said Hunter. "This is awkward, Teddy."

"It is, by Jove! and there are more of them. Look at that lot behind there.

They'll be here in three or four minutes--no time to plaster the crack and get away."

"We had better scuttle our plane and dive into the woods. There's just a chance of our getting across the Maritza into Bulgaria."

"That means internment. Besides, it would be simply rotten to destroy the machine if we can help it. Perhaps there's some other way. In any case we must get back. Put on a sprint."

They raced back to the spot where they had landed, the knoll concealing them from the Turkish search-party. The sight of the body of the German pilot suggested an idea to Burton.

"Look here, we must trick them," he said rapidly. "There's a bare chance of saving our machine, and I doubt whether we've time enough even to destroy it. For the next quarter of an hour I'm a German, and you're my English prisoner. We are done if there's a German among them, but that's our chance."

Removing his own cap, he replaced it with that of the German pilot, borrowing at the same time one or two small articles of his equipment. Then he bound Hunter's hands and feet.

"Slip-knots, old man," he said. "You can free yourself in a jiffy. But don't do it too soon. Just in time! I hear them coming. Here goes!"

He uttered a loud shout. In a few moments the horsemen appeared on the crest of the knoll. Burton waved his left hand, with his right holding a pistol pointed at Hunter's head. The horsemen, led by an elderly Turkish officer in grey uniform and fez, galloped down towards them. While the officer was still several paces distant, Burton saluted and addressed him.

"Sprechen Sie Deutsch, mein Herr?"

No one would have guessed with what anxious trepidation he awaited the answer. He had used almost all the German he knew. His heart leapt when the Turk shook his head.

"Vous parlez Français, monsieur?" said Burton.

"Oui, certainement. Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?"

"You have come in good time, monsieur le capitaine," said Burton in French. "I regret that I do not speak Turkish, and that our conversation must proceed in a language which, no doubt, you cordially detest. Our good Kaiser will soon forbid the use of it in Europe; German and Turkish are the languages of the future. Meanwhile! ... You see, monsieur le capitaine, there has been a duel in the air. My pilot was, unhappily, shot by the enemy. We both had to descend; the enemy, no doubt, had difficulties with his engine. No doubt he expected to find both the pilot and myself dead or disabled. But a true German, like a true Turk, is a hard man to kill. Single-handed I attacked the enemy as they landed. Imagine their consternation and fear! One of them, using the long legs which serve the cowardly English so well, fled into the wood. The other lies here."

The Turkish captain bent over his saddle to inspect the captured Englishman. For his benefit Hunter assumed an expression of sullen ferocity.

[image]

"He looks a terrible fellow"

"It was well done," said the Turk in French. "He looks a terrible fellow. I make you my compliments, monsieur. It was a brave deed to attack two men single-handed."

"Oh, that's nothing to us Germans," said Burton airily. "We never think of odds. We are like that; the greater the adverse odds, the better pleased we are."

"That is indeed the characteristic of your noble nation," said the Turk politely.

"Still, it is as well to reduce the odds when we can," Burton went on. "Half the enemy's force has escaped. Could you spare a few men, monsieur le capitaine, to scour the woods?"

"Certainly, though I have little time to spare. I am engaged, you will be glad to know, in escorting a fellow-countryman of yours, monsieur--a German in the secret service, who has just landed at Enos--with important information for headquarters at Keshan."

He broke off to give his troopers orders to hunt about in the woods for the escaped English airman. They were to return, even if unsuccessful, at the sound of his whistle. Meanwhile, Burton and Hunter had exchanged uneasy glances. The German could not be far away. No doubt he was coming up with other members of the escort. The sight of the falling aeroplanes had drawn the officer in advance.

The troopers galloped off. The officer turned once more towards Burton, whose expression of countenance gave no sign of the agitation within.

"It will be interesting to meet a fellow-countryman in this lonely spot," he said calmly. "May I offer you a cigarette, monsieur?"

The Turk took one from the opened case, thanked Burton, and turned the cigarette over in his fingers.

"Made in Cairo, monsieur?" he said.

"Yes, it is a privilege of us airmen to levy upon the enemy. Refugees have no need to smoke. With the airman it is a necessity--it steadies the nerves."

"True. And they make good cigarettes in Cairo." He lit the cigarette from an automatic lighter. "The Englishman looks frightened."

"He expects to be killed, I suppose, not knowing our German humanity. But you will excuse me, monsieur, if I examine the English aeroplane. It will come in

useful."

Burton returned to the machine, and, after feigning to examine it, proceeded to plaster the crack with nervous haste. The Turk had followed him, and, remaining in the saddle, watched his operations with much interest.

"It was this injury that caused the Englishmen to descend," Burton explained. "German bullets never fail."

"An English bullet was more successful, however," said the officer, glancing at the dead pilot.

"Not more successful, surely, monsieur. We have scores of good pilots, we can replace every man that falls; but the English cannot afford to lose a single machine. And do not our German newspapers tell us that they have hardly any left? The earth is the Kaiser's; the sea is his; the air is his also. Turkey will flourish again in German air."

Having filled up the crack, Burton proceeded to pour petrol into the tank.

"This fellow-countryman of mine?" he said.

"He will be here soon, no doubt. He is a trifle stout, and a poor horseman. Consequently he travels slowly. When he saw the aeroplanes descending he insisted on our pushing on to render assistance to his fellow-countrymen. He cannot miss the track, there is only one. But he should be in sight."

The Turk looked backward over the track, then saying, "Excuse me," he wheeled his horse and began to trot towards the knoll. Burton had by no means completed the replenishment of the tank. He felt that something must be done.

"Monsieur le capitaine!" he shouted.

The Turk pulled up. Burton went towards him with an air of mystery.

"Your men are at fault, monsieur," he said. "It would be a pity to let the Englishman escape, and you have no time to waste. Perhaps if I show the way!"

He walked on up the knoll, the Turk riding by his side.

"There, monsieur, you see that big tree on the far side of the bay? If you do not find the fugitive thereabout you won't find him anywhere."

The Turk hesitated. Perhaps he was considering whether it comported with an elderly captain's dignity to take a personal part in the search. Burton eyed him anxiously, hoping that he would go, meet the approaching German, and take him with him. The pause was brief. The temptation to catch a live Englishman overbore all considerations of dignity. With a word of thanks to Burton the Turk cantered on towards the big tree.

Burton breathed again. He hurried back to the seaplane.

"Slip the knots, Dick," he said, "but don't get up. I'll give you the word. I hope I've got rid of the Turk for a while."

He was in the act of pouring petrol into the tank when a figure appeared from round the western base of the knoll. It was a big Sancho-Panza-like person,

mounted on a mule.

"Great Scott!" murmured Burton.

Dropping the empty tin, he hastened to the aviatik for another.

"I say, Dick, do you recognise that fellow?" he asked.

"Christopoulos!" Hunter whispered.

"As large as life! What on earth are we to do? He will recognise us directly, even if he hasn't done so already."

"Shoot him and scoot!"

"I haven't enough petrol yet. The tank still leaks, though not so badly, and if we shoot, the Turks will swarm up before I can fill up and get away. I think I had better go on with the job, let him come up, and trust to luck."

Keeping his back to the pseudo-Greek, Burton carried another tin to the seaplane. Before he had emptied it into the tank the spy came within hailing distance and let out a jovial greeting in German. No doubt he had recognised the German airman's cap, and, without misgiving, hailed his supposed compatriot.

"Good-morning, my friend," he shouted. "I congratulate you. Another German victory!"

Burton, his back still towards the spy, finished pouring out the petrol, and placed the tin on the ground. As he straightened himself he discreetly drew his revolver and suddenly turned round. The spy was now within half a dozen paces of him.

"Thank you, Mr. Christopoulos," he said. "Another victory--but not a German victory. We shall presently see who is to be congratulated. Meanwhile, you will dismount."

The German, who had reined up at the first glance at Burton's face, turned a sickly colour and half-opened his mouth as if to shout.

"Silence!" cried Burton peremptorily. "If you make the slightest sound I will shoot you on the spot."

He held his revolver carelessly in his left hand, not pointing it at the German lest any of the Turks should come within view. The spy showed more alacrity than skill in dismounting. He clumsily clambered from his saddle, without daring to turn his head in the direction of the Turks, who could now be heard calling to one another beyond the knoll. Burton went up to him.

[image]

NONPLUSSED

"Hand over your revolver," he said.

"I haven't got----" the spy was beginning. Burton cut him short.

"No nonsense! Hand it over. Quick. At the word 'three' I fire. One--two----"

With an agonised look the German made a dive for his revolver. Burton took it with his right hand before it was released from the spy's tight pocket. From a distance they might have appeared to be shaking hands.

Burton had been rapidly casting about for a means of disposing of the German. He could not shoot him in cold blood; there might perhaps be time to tie him up, but he would then still be able to convey to the Turkish headquarters the information he had gathered at Tenedos. That must certainly be prevented. There was only one thing to be done: they must take him with them.

Just as Burton had reached this conclusion, a Turk appeared on the knoll.

"Come with me," said Burton sternly.

The German accompanied him to the seaplane. He might be supposed to be indulging his curiosity. Standing between him and the knoll, Burton said--

"You are interested in aviation. Seat yourself on the right-hand float."

The spy made as if to turn round. Burton lifted his revolver.

"Don't waste time," he said.

With a groan the spy sat on the spot indicated.

Burton seized the strap that bound him to his seat, and rapidly tied the German to the upright connecting the float with the body of the seaplane, calling to Hunter--who, still lying on the ground, had watched these proceedings with excitement--to cover the spy with his revolver.

The prisoner had hardly been secured when the Turkish captain cantered over the knoll, followed by two or three men.

"Now, Dick!" cried Burton.

Hunter sprang up and rushed to his place.

"Not there!" said Burton. "Get on to the left-hand float to balance the machine."

Meanwhile he had started the engine, in desperate anxiety lest it should not have gathered momentum before the Turks came up. The spy had heard the thudding of their horses' hoofs as they, seeing the supposed English prisoner spring up, galloped down the knoll. Turning his head, he let out a frenzied shout. But it was too late. Burton had vaulted into his seat, and, just three seconds before the amazed and furious Turks reached the brink of the water, the seaplane was skimming the surface.

The spy was now filling the air with his frantic cries. Burton afterwards said it was like the booming of a buzzard. The Turks dismounted, and from the edge of the lake fired at the fast-receding machine. One or two shots pierced the planes, and from a shrill cry of terror from the German, Burton supposed that he had been hit. But he was too busy to think of him. Forcing the engine to the

utmost he was already manipulating the elevator. The machine rose steadily. At the first possible moment Burton swung it round to the west. In a minute or two he crossed the Maritza. Climbing ever higher, he shifted his course a point or two to the south, and within twenty minutes the machine swooped down beside the cruiser, a few miles out in the bay, and a number of laughing bluejackets hastened to assist two dripping objects to climb on board.

[image]

A discomfited spy

IV

The cruiser made all speed back to Tenedos. There the spy, a forlorn, chapfallen individual, was taken ashore under an escort of marines. Within a short time a drum-head court-martial was constituted. Papers found on the prisoner left no doubt of his occupation; his protest that he was a subject of King Constantine availed him nothing. When the sentence had been pronounced, he recovered his courage and confessed himself a German, and it was as a German soldier that he paid the final penalty.

Burton's exploit was reported to the Admiralty, and some weeks later, when he returned one evening from reconnoitring the Turkish trenches after the landing on the Gallipoli peninsula had been so magnificently accomplished, he was welcomed with the news that he had been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal by the King.

[image]

Chapter IV Heading

THE WATCH TOWER

I

A rough, lumbering ox-cart was crawling slowly up a steep winding hill-track in Southern Macedonia. The breath of the two panting oxen formed steam-clouds in the frosty air; slighter wreaths of vapour clung about the heads of the two persons who trudged along beside them. One was an old man, tall, broad, and vigorous, his hair straggling beneath his fur cap, his long white beard stiff with the ice of his congealed breath. The other was a boy, whose face, ruddy with health and cold, showed scantly under a similar cap much too large for him, and above a conglomeration of warm wrappings reaching to his feet and giving him the appearance of a moving bundle, thick and shapeless.

"I am tired, grandfather," murmured the boy, pausing at the foot of a steep ascent.

"Tchk!" the old man ejaculated, emitting a puff of white breath which the north-east wind from behind carried over the head of the nearest ox. "Put your shoulder to the wheel, Marco. Show yourself worthy of your name."

The boy obediently went round the cart and set his shoulder to the heavy wooden wheel on the off side. His grandfather shoving at the other, they helped the labouring oxen to drag the vehicle up the ascent, and then stopped to rest.

"That was well done, little son," said a woman of some thirty years, sitting in the forepart of the cart. She handed the boy a cake. Behind her the cart was piled high with bits of furniture and bundles of household gear. The boy seated himself on a rock and nibbled his cake. The oxen moved their heads about as if in search of provender. Straightening his tall form, the old man turned his back, and in the full blast of the bitter wind scanned the country to the north-east. A faint boom sounded far away in that direction. The woman started.

"Do you see anything, Father?" she asked, anxiously.

"Nothing, Nuta. But we must on. It will be two hours or more before we can call ourselves safe."

Smacking the heaving flank of the near-side ox, he set the beasts in motion, and the cart creaked and jolted on over the rough track. This was lightly covered with snow, which showed traces of those other travellers who in this December of 1915 had journeyed over the same route. Snow lay deeper in the hollows on either side, and on the heights in the distance. It was a bleak and desolate landscape, its rugged features somewhat softened, however, by the blanket of snow. Here and

there dark patches stood out in the surrounding white, representing bushes or trees; but there was no house or cottage, no sign of life.

Old Marco, a small Serbian landed proprietor, had postponed his flight from before the invading Bulgars until all the other inhabitants of his village had departed. To the last he had hoped that the French and British forces would arrive in time to save him. His son was away fighting, as were all the men from the little estate. Having loaded all his portable possessions on to the cart, he waited with his daughter-in-law and grandson until the ever-approaching boom of guns warned him that further delay would mean ruin, and then set off southwards, to gain, if possible, protection from the Allied forces that were said to be retreating on Salonika.

The old man's pride was wounded. He traced his descent from that Marco Kralevich who, towards the end of the fourteenth century, struggled to maintain the independence of Serbia against the Turks, and whose name and knightly prowess live to-day in song and story. He had never tired of relating to young Marco the heroic deeds of his great ancestor, and it cut him to the heart that he was compelled, in the wreck of his country's fortunes, to abandon the homestead where he had kept alive the traditions of Serbian valour. Even now, old as he was, he would have borne a part in the national struggle but for the claims of his dear ones upon his protection.

The cart lumbered slowly on. From time to time the old man glanced anxiously behind, appealing to the boy--did he see anything moving there, or there? On one such occasion, when they stopped to rest themselves and the oxen, and the old man was looking to the rear, young Marco suddenly pricked up his ears, and stood intently listening.

"A strange sound, Grandfather," he said. "Where?"

The boy nodded towards the east. "What is it?"

"Like the hum of a bee far away."

The old man came to the boy's side and listened.

"I cannot hear it," he said after a few moments, adding impatiently, "Tchk! This is not the time of bees."

"But I hear it still," persisted Marco. "It is louder."

He looked around, puzzled to account for the unaccustomed sound.

"I hear nothing," said his mother.

"Look!" he cried, pointing excitedly into the grey sky.

The eyes of his elders followed his outstretched hand, but they saw nothing.

"It has gone," sighed the boy after a little. "But I did see something. Perhaps it was an eagle. I think it flew just behind the hills there."

His eyes ranged the horizon, where the rugged line of white indented the sky. A spot of blue appeared in the pale vault, and a ray of sunlight trickled

through.

"Look!" cried Marco again, stretching out his hand this time to the north. "There is something moving on the snow."

The old man gazed northward, rubbed his eyes, shook his head.

"Can you see anything, Nuta?" he asked.

"Dark specks, miles and miles away--yes, Father, they are moving. There are more of them. They are like ants."

"The Bulgars!" muttered the old man. "Come, we must haste."

Returning to the cart, he whipped up the oxen, and the patient beasts, heaving their load out of the drift into which its wheels had settled, hauled it, creaking and groaning, towards the brightening south.

II

Meanwhile, in a broad gully not far away, a different scene was being enacted.

Across the gully lay the tangled ruins of a biplane. From the midst of the wreckage crawled a long figure, in the overalls, helmet, and goggles of a member of the Flying Corps. His goggles had been partially displaced, and lay askew upon his nose. There were spots of blood, already frozen, upon his cheek. His movements were slow and painful, and when, having emerged from the shapeless mass of metal and canvas, he tried to stand erect, he reeled, saved himself from falling by an effort, and dropping upon an adjacent rock, rubbed his eyes, groaned, and sat as one dazed.

His immobility lasted only a few moments. Staggering to his feet, his features twisted with pain, he walked unsteadily to the ruins of the aeroplane.

"Enderby, old chap," he called, bending down.

There was no answer.

Swiftly he pulled away the broken wires and fragments of the shattered framework, beneath which the form of his companion was pinned, then knelt and laid his finger on the wrist of the unconscious man.

"Thank Heaven!" he murmured.

Taking a flask from his pocket he poured a few drops of liquid between the half-open lips, then lifted the man carefully out of the wreckage and laid him down on the slope. Upon his brow he placed a little snow; he repeated his medicinal dose, and watched anxiously. It was some minutes before the eyelids opened, only to close again as a spasm of pain distorted the injured man's features.

"Where is it, old man?" asked Burton.

"My leg."

The answer came faintly.

"It doesn't hurt you to breathe?"

Enderby shook his head.

"Arms all right?"

And when Enderby had lifted them one after the other, Burton placed the flask in his comrade's right hand.

"Take another pull at that while I have a look at you," he said.

Removing the puttees and cutting away the stocking beneath, Burton saw that his friend's right leg was broken. He felt him all over, causing him to wince now and then as he touched a bruise. There was no other serious injury.

"Your leg's badly crocked, old man; but I'm jolly glad it's no worse. When that shell winged us I made sure our number was up."

"What about you?"

"I'm just one compound ache--must be bruised from top to toe. Our luck's out to-day. Just clench your teeth while I see what I can do in first aid. The machine's smashed to smithereens. How I'm to get you back to the M.O. beats me."

"Whereabouts are we?"

"Somewhere in Macedonia! In a gully, with hills all round, not a living thing in sight. I hoped we'd be able to flutter back to our lines, but it wasn't to be. Our troops must be miles away, and getting farther every minute, worse luck! What fate dogs us, that we must always be retreating? Ah! that made you squirm; sorry, old man, but you'll be easier now."

He had bound up the leg, and now brushed away the beads of sweat which the exertion, in his own sorry state, had brought out upon his brow.

"Now, look here, Enderby," he said, "the best thing I can do is to trudge off after our men and get a machine to bring you in. And the sooner I start, the better. You ought to be safe enough here. You're well hidden; the Bulgars' advance won't bring them past this spot, there's no road. But if I lose any time they'll be somewhere in the neighbourhood before a machine could arrive, and then it'll be hopeless. I'll rummage out some food from our wreck, and leave you that and my flask----"

"You'd better take it; you've a long tramp before you, and may come across some advance patrols of the Bulgars for all you know. Besides----"

He paused. Both men pricked up their ears simultaneously. Each looked an anxious inquiry at the other. From somewhere not far away came a rhythmic sound--a succession of strident, scraping sounds--which in a moment they recognised as the creaking of a cart.

Neither man spoke. Burton stole down the gully, and round the shoulder of

a hill in the direction of the sound, which grew louder as he went. Apprehensive that his plans for the rescue of his friend were already defeated, he peered cautiously round the corner of rock. He beheld a rough hill-track winding upwards from right to left across his front. Some distance to the right another track ran into the first, skirting a spur from a north-westerly direction. Nothing was visible on either track, but the regular monotonous creaking of the cart was drawing nearer.

Burton drew back behind a rock and waited. Presently, from round one of the innumerable bends and twists in the main track, appeared the great heads of two oxen yoked together; then a woman's form came into view, perched on the forepart of a heavily laden cart; last of all, tramping in the rear, a tall old man, and, by his side, a boy whose head reached scarcely higher than his elbow.

The watcher breathed more freely. It was only a typical refugee party; he had already seen hundreds like it toiling along the southward roads to Salonika. There was nothing to fear here; on the contrary, it suggested a means by which Captain Enderby might be at once removed, without the delay that would be caused by his own going and coming.

The cart was creeping laboriously up towards him. When it was nearly opposite, Burton stepped forth from his hiding-place. His sudden appearance drew signs of momentary alarm. The woman stiffened; the old man whipped out a revolver; the boy ran round in front of the cart, and with a fierce expression, comical on his young face, stood before his mother, drawing from his belt a knife.

Burton threw out his hands and called out that he was an Englishman. But even before he spoke the attitude of hostility had relaxed, the woman had addressed a few words to the old man, and he had already replaced his weapon. They had recognised that the stranger was neither a Bulgar nor a German. Only the boy remained suspicious and alert, stoutly gripping his knife.

The cart had stopped. Burton walked towards it. He had picked up a few words of Greek during the eleven months he had spent in the East, and he explained in that language that he was a friend and an Englishman. Rather to his surprise the old man replied in French.

"Does monsieur speak French?"

The wall of nationality was down, and in the language of their common ally the Serbian and the Englishman held a rapid colloquy. Presently the old man turned to the boy.

"You were right, Marco," he said in his own tongue. "That thing you heard humming like a bee, that thing you saw moving like an eagle, was an English aeroplane. It has come to the ground and broken, struck by a Bulgar's shell."

"Oh! let me see it," cried the boy, eagerly, forgetting all else in the new object of excitement, slipping the knife back into his belt, and moving away from

the cart.

"Wait!" said his grandfather, peremptorily. He resumed his conversation with Burton. There was anxiety, hesitancy in his air. He appeared to be struggling with himself. "The enemy is not far behind," he said. "We have far to go; every minute is precious." He looked nervously along the track behind him, then seemed to question his daughter with his eyes. She nodded. "Tchk!" he ejaculated. "I will do it. No true Serb, monsieur, much less a descendant of Marco Kralevich, can refuse to succour an ally of his nation. Show me the way."

Young Marco, to his disappointment, was left to guard the cart and to keep a lookout. The old man hastened with Burton to the spot where Captain Enderby lay beside the wreck of the aeroplane. As they went, Burton caught sight of a square tower on a hill-top far away to the south.

"What is that?" he asked.

"An old watch-tower," replied the Serb. "There are many such on high points in different parts of the country."

Burton paused a moment to scan the solitary tower through his field glasses, then resumed his course. On reaching the fallen man, the old Serb at once set about placing the injured limb in splints formed out of the wreckage, preparatory to carrying him back to the cart. He was still thus engaged when Marco came running up the gully.

"Grandfather," he said, breathlessly, "a party of horsemen are coming up the side track."

"How many are they, boy?"

"Ten or twelve. They are far away."

"I must go back," said the old man. "You will still be safe here."

"I will go with you," said Burton. "My glasses may be useful."

They followed the boy, who ran ahead, regained the cart, and went beyond it to the point where the two tracks met. The sky had now cleared, and the white-clad country glistened in the sunlight. Keeping under cover, Burton peered through his glasses along the winding track. At first he saw nobody, but presently a horseman came into sight round a bend, followed closely by two more riding abreast. After a short interval, another couple appeared, the first file of a party of ten, riding two by two. They were still too far distant for Burton to distinguish anything more than that they were in military uniform.

He told the old man what he had seen.

"Beyond doubt they are Bulgars," the Serb growled, drawing his fingers through his beard, which the sunlight had thawed.

He stood silent for a little, his eyes fixed in thought, his hands working nervously.

"They will overtake us," he said at length. "We must move the cart from the

track. Come, monsieur."

They hurried back to the cart. At a word from the old man the woman dismounted, and going to the heads of the oxen, led them off the track over the rough ground of the hill-face, while the three others set their shoulders to the wheels. By their united efforts the unwieldy vehicle was hauled round the shoulder of the hill towards the gully, to a spot two or three hundred yards from the aeroplane, where it was out of sight from either of the tracks. Leaving it there in charge of Marco and his mother, the two men returned, obliterating the traces of the wheels in the snow, and finally posting themselves behind a rocky ridge near the junction of the tracks, where they could see the approaching horsemen when they should pass, without being seen themselves.

III

Some twenty minutes later they heard the tramp of hoofs, somewhat muffled by the snow, and guttural voices. Soon the first horseman passed before them--a Bulgarian officer. Immediately behind him came a group of three, the two on the outside being German officers, the horseman between them a middle-aged Serb in the characteristic dress of the peasant proprietor. The watchers noticed that he was tied round the middle by a rope, the other end of which was held by a Bulgarian trooper riding behind. Old Marco's eyes gleamed with the light of recognition. He told Burton later that the prisoner was one Milosh Nikovich, a friend of his, a small farmer whose property lay a few miles from his own estate.

On arriving at the junction of the tracks the officers halted. One of the Germans took a map from his pocket, and pored over it with his companions; they were apparently consulting together. Then they put questions to their prisoner. Their words were inaudible. The Serb's face wore an expression of sullen defiance, and it was clear that his replies were unsatisfactory, for the trooper who held the rope moved up his horse, and lifting a foot, drove his spur savagely into the prisoner's calf. The man winced, but remained motionless and silent. Burton heard old Marco mutter curses below his breath. Then one of the Germans pointed southwards questioningly; the prisoner gave what appeared to be an affirmative answer, and the party pushed on. It soon disappeared through the windings of the track. The watchers counted fourteen in all.

When the enemy were out of sight and hearing, Burton turned to the old man.

"A scouting party?" he said.

"Without doubt," replied the Serb. "The main body must be behind. Will you look for them through your glasses?"

Burton left their hiding-place for a spot whence he could view the tracks and the plain beyond. No troops were in sight, but the boom of guns came faintly on the air from the north-east. Burton knew, from what he had seen during the morning's reconnaissance, that somewhere eastward from the spot where he stood the British forces were steadily falling back in face of overwhelming numbers of Bulgars and Germans. Was it possible that the patrol that had just passed was the advance guard of a flanking force? Unluckily his reconnaissance had been cut short by the Bulgarian shell almost as soon as it was begun. The peril of Captain Enderby and himself, and of his Serbian friends, was complicated with a possible unexpected danger to the British army in retreat. To guard against the latter seemed to be out of his power. The immediate question was, how to ensure the safety of Enderby and the Serbian family with whose lot his own was for the moment cast.

Remaining at the spot from which he could detect any signs of an enemy advance from the north, he talked over the situation with old Marco.

"The enemy are in front and behind," he said. "It seems we have little chance of getting through. But if we don't get through----"

"We should be safe for a time in the gully. The enemy will keep to the tracks. But that would help us little in the end, for if they advance beyond us, they will form a wall without gates, and we must either surrender or starve."

"And meanwhile my friend is without proper treatment, and may have to lose his leg or be lamed for life. You have no stomach any more than I for being a prisoner with the Bulgars. Don't you think we had better push on, and try to slip past the scouting party? It is not likely they will go far in advance of their main body. Isn't there a way over the hills without taking to the track?"

"If we were on foot we might steal through the country, but not with the cart. That holds all my worldly possessions. And your friend cannot be moved without it. Look, monsieur; do not my eyes, old as they are, see masses of men moving on the plain yonder?"

"You are right," said Burton, after a glance northward. "The main body is on the move. We must decide at once. Let us carry Captain Enderby to the cart, push on, and trust to luck."

Hurrying back to the gully, they carried the injured man to the cart. While the Serb led this back to the track, Burton took the precaution of removing the carburetter and one or two other essential parts from the engine of the aeroplane. This was badly smashed, but it was just as well not to leave anything of possible use to the enemy. Then he hauled the machine-gun from the litter that covered it, expecting to find it hopelessly shattered. To his surprise it appeared to have suf-

fered no injury except superficial dents, and the ammunition belts were evidently perfect. Hurrying after the others with the engine parts, he laid these on the cart, then took young Marco back with him to help him carry away the machine-gun and ammunition.

"We've saved something from the wreck, old man," he said to Enderby as he came up with the gun on his back.

"Hardly worth while, is it?" asked the captain. "There's precious little chance of our getting through. Hadn't you better shy it into a gully in case they capture us?"

"I will at the last minute if things look hopeless; but we'll stick to it as long as we can."

All being ready they set off along the track. Old Marco sent the boy ahead to scout. The woman resumed her seat on the cart, where a comfortable place had been arranged among the baggage for Captain Enderby. The two men followed on foot, pushing at the wheels where the gradient was too steep for the wearied oxen.

So they toiled along for upwards of an hour. Young Marco ahead had not caught sight of the horsemen; there was no sign of the enemy in the rear. It was the old man's hope that there would be time, if danger threatened, to rush the cart into some hollow or some gap between the rocks. Such a threat was more likely to arise from the scouting party than from the larger force behind, and the boy, as instructed by his grandfather, kept sufficiently in advance to give timely warning.

The track was continuously up hill, broad at some points, at others so narrow that the cart was only just able to pass between the rocky borders, sometimes as low as kerbstones, sometimes rising to a height of many feet. The frequent windings prevented the travellers from getting a direct view for any considerable distance ahead. Every now and then they had glimpses of the watch-tower which Burton had previously noticed, and which they were gradually approaching. At such times he scanned it through his glasses, half expecting to find that some of the scouting party had ascended it to survey the surrounding country. But no human figures yet showed above the summit.

At length, however, on rounding a corner, the travellers were startled by a sudden flash from the tower. They halted, Burton levelled his glasses, and declared that he saw two heads and pairs of shoulders projecting above the top. Other flashes followed, at intervals long or short.

"They are heliographing to the main body behind us," he said to Enderby, repeating the information in French to the Serb.

"Can they see us?" asked Enderby.

"They might perhaps if they looked, but they are gazing far beyond us, of course. We had better back a little, though."

They had, in fact, halted before the oxen had come completely into view from the tower, and by backing a few feet they were wholly concealed.

The three men held an anxious consultation. The tower was probably two miles ahead. To go on would involve discovery by the enemy. On the other hand, parties of Bulgarians might already be marching up the track behind them. It seemed that they were trapped.

"We had better wait a little," Burton concluded, "and see whether they leave the tower and go forward. In that case we might venture to proceed."

The signalling continued for some few minutes, then ceased. The men disappeared from the summit of the tower. Burton was on the point of suggesting that they should move on when he caught sight of a small figure flitting rapidly from rock to rock down the track towards them.

"It is the boy," he said, after a look through his glasses.

In a few minutes young Marco arrived, excited and breathless.

"Three horsemen are coming down the hill," he reported.

"Tchk!" muttered the old man, repeating the news. "How far away, child?"

"A mile or more. They are riding slowly; the track is steep."

For a few moments consternation and dismay paralysed their faculties. That the horsemen formed part of the patrol they had already seen was certain; no others could have safely passed the tower occupied by the enemy. Discovery and capture seemed inevitable. The fugitives might, indeed, clamber among the rocks and conceal themselves for a time; but the nature of the ground at this spot precluded the removal of the cart, and its tell-tale presence on the track unattended would put a short limit to their safety.

At this critical moment the old Serb's experience of half a century of mountain warfare came to his aid.

"We must ambush the Bulgars," he said. "Look there!"

He pointed to a spot a few yards in their rear, at the end of a narrow stretch of the track which had given him an anxious moment in leading the oxen. On one side the bank rose rugged and steep, on the other it fell away, not precipitously, but in a jagged slope which had threatened ruin to the cart if the wheel had chanced to slip over the edge of the track. Burton quickly seized the possibilities of the situation.

"By Jove! It's risky, but we'll try it," he remarked to Enderby.

The captain had already taken his revolver from its case. But old Marco had conceived a plan that would render Captain Enderby's co-operation unnecessary. He explained it rapidly to Burton, and they proceeded to carry it out. The woman was told to conceal herself behind a thorn bush growing in a cleft in the bank. The cart was backed to the chosen spot, and young Marco, his eyes alight with excitement and eagerness, clambered up to the driver's seat. A rug was thrown

over Enderby and the machine-gun lying at his side, and the old man took up a position with Burton behind the cart, concealed by the pile of furniture from the eyes of any one approaching down the hill.

The Serb had taken a rifle from beneath the baggage.

"There are only three," he said. "I can shoot them one by one."

"No, no!" cried Burton. "The shots would alarm their friends above. Besides, they'll be more useful to us alive, as hostages, perhaps, even if we don't get useful information out of them."

"You are right," said the old man, "but it is a pity," and he reluctantly laid the rifle aside.

They had reason to commend young Marco's scouting, for only a few minutes after their preparations were completed, the horsemen were heard approaching the bend. The boy, whose eyes had been fixed on his grandfather, at a nod from him whipped up the oxen, and the cart lurched forward just as the horsemen came in sight. As if surprised by their appearance, Marco pulled up so that there was barely room for a horse to pass on the side where the bank shelved downwards. His grandfather and Burton were still hidden in the rear.

The three horsemen had been riding abreast, but at sight of the cart they moved into single file. The first was a German officer; then came the Serbian prisoner with the Bulgarian trooper holding the rope behind.

The German officer reined up, and asked Marco a question. The boy shook his head, and the German turned impatiently to the prisoner, ordering him to repeat the question. At this moment Burton, revolver in hand, slipped from behind the cart on the side of the declivity, while the old man with some difficulty squeezed himself between the wheel and the high bank on the other side. A gleam in the eyes of the prisoner apprised the German that something was happening behind him, and he was in the act of turning when his arm was seized and he saw himself confronted by a determined-looking young airman, levelling a revolver within a few inches of his head. One arm was held as in a vice, the other hand was engaged with the rein; it was impossible to draw his own revolver. He called to the trooper to shoot, but that warrior was otherwise engaged.

"Dismount, sir," said Burton, quietly. "You are my prisoner."

[image]

"DISMOUNT, SIR."

And seeing that there was no help for it, the German made haste to obey.

Meanwhile on the other side old Marco had performed his allotted part.

The trooper, catching sight of Burton before the German, was for a moment too much surprised to be capable of action; but then, dropping the rope he held, he was about to spur forward to his superior's assistance, when the old Serb, who had crept round while the man's attention was occupied, suddenly hurled himself upon him. The old man was beset by no scruples. A Bulgar was always a Bulgar. A shot would raise an alarm; cold steel was silent. All the strength of his sinewy arm, all the heat of age-long national hatred, went into the knife-thrust that hurled the trooper from his saddle, over the edge of the track, and down the sharp-edged rocks of the slope beyond.

Within less than a minute the ambush had succeeded without any sound or commotion that could have been heard by the enemy in the tower nearly two miles away, and out of their sight.

IV

"Milosh Nikovich, this is a good day, old friend," said old Marco, as he released the prisoner.

"A good day indeed, Marco Kralevich. But I am amazed. Who is he that dealt with the German?"

"Hand me that rope, if you please," came from Burton in French. "Clasp your hands behind, sir," he added to the German, in English.

"You shpeak to me!" spluttered that irate officer. "Know you zat I am an officer, a captain of ze 59th Brandenburger Regiment? It is not fit zat I haf my hands bounden."

"You must allow me to judge of that, sir," remarked Burton, with a quiet smile.

"No, I protest. I refuse; it is insolence. You captivate me, zat is true; you seize me ven I look ze ozer vay; zat is not vat you call shport. But I gif you my parole----"

"I can't accept it, sir."

"Ze parole of a German officer----"

"It's no good talking, captain," Burton interposed, bluntly. "The word of a German has no value just now. If you do not submit quietly I shall have to use force. No doubt you will be released when you are safe in the British lines. Come now!"

Amid a copious flow of guttural protestation the captain allowed his hands to be tied behind him.

"I felt rather sorry for the chap," said Burton to Enderby afterwards. "He looked a decent fellow as Germans go, and perhaps I did him an injustice. But, being a German, we can't trust him; and we can't afford to take risks."

While he was engaged in securing his prisoner, the two Serbs had been conversing rapidly. Old Marco came up to him, and took him apart.

"We have gained time at least, monsieur," he said. "My friend Milosh Nikovich tells me that the others are remaining in the tower for the night; the main body is not expected until the morning."

"That will give us a chance to slip past in the darkness--if only your wheels didn't groan so. Stay! I have some vaseline in my wallet, I think; we can grease them with that. It's nearly four o'clock, I see; the mist is rising; that will help us. I suppose, by the way, the Bulgars in the tower will not expect this German to return?"

The old man spoke to his compatriot.

"He does not know," he said.

"Then we shall have to look out. Luckily the sun is going down; they can't heliograph any more; and it will be impossible for the people above to see the track through the mist, so they won't know that the horsemen have been checked. If the air had been clear they would certainly have become suspicious on failing to catch sight of the party on open stretches behind us. With luck we shall get through. What were they doing with your friend?"

The old Serb repeated what Milosh had told him during their colloquy. His village had been raided; most of the inhabitants had been massacred by the Bulgars; he himself had been impressed as guide, and forced to lead the patrol to the tower, which they knew by hearsay, though ignorant of the hill-track that led directly to it.

"I reproached him for his weakness," added the old man apologetically. "He ought to have refused to act as guide. Better that a Serb should have allowed himself to be shot. But a man does not always see clearly; he has a family--who are safe, praise to the Highest!"

"But why did they wish to reach the tower?"

"It commands the country for many miles. They could see from it the forces of your brave countrymen. Without doubt they signalled what they had discovered, and I suspect that to-morrow a force of light cavalry will come this way to fall on their flank at the cross-roads below."

"That is one reason the more for getting through. We must do it to-night. You know the country, my friend; we must act on your advice."

Since no move could be made until it was quite dark, they sat down on the rocks and took a meal, eating sparingly of their provisions as a matter of prudence. Who could tell what the night and the morrow would bring forth?

The Englishmen were amused at young Marco, who, munching a wheat-cake, solemnly watched their every movement, and eyed longingly the sandwiches they took from their tin. Burton beckoned him forward and gave him a sandwich. The boy took it, hesitated a moment, then shyly offered his wheat-cake in exchange, and ran back to his mother.

"I'm afraid you're in great pain, poor old chap!" said Burton, noticing the pallor and drawn expression of Enderby's features.

"Oh, that's all right. I can stick it out. I rather fancy our German friend feels worse. It must be horribly galling to his nobility. What's his name'?"

The German was sitting apart, moodily gnawing his moustache. Burton went over to him, loosed his hands, and offered him a sandwich and his flask. The former he accepted with a sort of unwilling graciousness; the latter he declined.

"Your visky I drink not; I haf in my own flask goot German vine. You permit me?" he asked, ironically.

"Of course. It isn't whisky, by the way. May I ask your name?"

"It is Captain von Hildenheim. I am not pleased. Zis is not ze handling zat is vorth a German officer. Vunce more--

"Sorry. We can't have it all over again. You must make the best of it. It won't be for long."

"No, zat is true; it vill not be for long," returned the German with a slight smile.

"He evidently thinks we shall be collared to-night or to-morrow," said Burton, when, having bound his prisoner again, he returned to Enderby. "Have you got a cigarette in your case? Mine's empty."

He sat by his friend, smoking in silence, meditating as he watched the wreaths mingling with the mist in the growing darkness. Presently he got up, and went to the spot where the Serbs were grouped. Young Marco, wrapped in a rug, was already asleep on the cart.

"What about this tower?" he asked the grandfather. "How is it placed? What is its strength and its state of repair? I don't ask idly; an idea occurred to me just now."

"I know it well," answered the old man. "Twenty years ago I held it during a Bulgar comitadji raid. It stands on a spur on the hill-top. The track passes not far beneath it. On two sides the ground forms a sort of glacis. The tower is solidly built of stone; it has two storeys. What is its condition, Milosh Nikovich? It is twenty years since I was there."

"It is strong and sound, Marco Kralevich, except inside. They took me only into the lower room. The woodwork was rotted away, or perhaps some of it has been removed."

"Yes, it may be so. In the last war the Greeks held it for a time against the

Turks. The place is well chosen for a watch-tower. From the top you see for many miles, most freely towards the north-east, whence we have come; less freely, but still a great way, towards the south-west, in which direction the British Army is retreating, monsieur. Tchk! Why did not your country and France allow us to fall on the Bulgars before they were ready? Serbia pays a heavy price."

Burton felt he had nothing to say to this, and after a few condoling words returned to his place by Enderby's side. The information he had gathered had caused his half-formed idea to crystallise.

"I say!" he began, seating himself on the edge of the cart.

"Say on," returned Enderby, smiling at his friend's solemn face.

"Well, there are only ten or eleven in the tower above there."

"What is the precise force of your adverb?"

"What adverb? Oh, 'only.' Well, ten or eleven's not a great crowd. There are four of us, without counting you and the woman----"

"Three men and a boy! We'll assume for the moment that one Englishman is worth four of any other nation; but are your two and a half Serbs equal to the other six or seven? Of course I see what you are driving at."

"Well, isn't it worth trying? There's no doubt that a Bulgarian column intends to cut off our men's retreat, and if we could seize the tower, and hold them up even for an hour or two, it might make all the difference."

"But they're in possession; and remember, the attack needs more men than the defence. The odds are dead against you, Ted."

"Not altogether. You must allow for the darkness, surprise, and the cocksureness of the enemy. Didn't a corporal carry off twelve prisoners single-handed at Loos the other day? With a little luck----"

"We've a way of assuming that the luck is going to be on our side! Well, see what the old Serb says. I must be out of it, unfortunately; but you needn't consider me."

"That's very good of you, but, of course, I do consider you. If it wasn't for you I'd not hesitate a moment."

"Don't let that trouble you. At the worst they'll only collar me. The risks will be wholly yours."

Burton returned to the Serbs, sat down beside them, and talked to them until the dusk had deepened into night.

The upshot of their conversation was presently disclosed. While young Marco was thoroughly greasing the axle-trees, Burton inflicted a still deeper wound on the dignity of Captain von Hildenheim by gagging him. Milosh was already in possession of his revolver.

Then the little party started quietly on the upward track.

A cold wind had set in from the north-east, dispersing the mist, and carrying

with it an occasional shower of powdery snow. Except during these brief showers the sky was clear and brilliant with starlight. A glance behind showed the red camp-fires of the enemy far in the plain below. Ahead, the tower, when they caught sight of it, loomed black like a sentinel against the indigo background. A faint glow shone from one of its shutterless windows, half-way up the wall.

The track was so well shadowed by its rocky banks that there was little risk of the party being seen. Yet, when they were still some distance from the tower, Burton deemed it prudent to call a halt. There was a whispered consultation, then Milosh went forward alone to reconnoitre.

Creeping up with every precaution, eyes and ears alert, he came within sight of a low wall some forty or fifty paces from the tower, pierced by a single aperture where at one time had been a gate. This wall shut off the tower and the crag on which it stood from the narrow bridle-path that mounted the hill to the north, and fell away to the south towards the valley.

In the gap in the wall a sentry stood, finding such shelter from the biting wind as the thickness of the stonework afforded. He blew upon his hands, stamped his feet, murmured his discomfort. At one moment he took out a watch, and seemed to caress it with his fingers. He did not lift it towards his eyes; he could not have seen the time in the starlight; and the shiver which visibly shook him as he returned it to his pocket was the shudder of physical cold; he had forgotten the ruthless butchery of the Serb who had, not long before, been the owner of the watch.

[image]

MILOSH WAITS.

All was quiet around. Only the feeble ray high up in the tower showed that the place was occupied. The sentry's faculties were numbed by the cold, or he might have noticed that the even contour of the wall, some few paces from him to the north, was broken by a dark protuberance which had not been there in daylight. It might have been a buttress, except that there were no buttresses on the outside of the wall. Astonished as he must have been if he had observed it, he would have been still more amazed had he been tramping his beat before the gate instead of cowering from the icy blast. For the dark shape moved, imperceptibly, like the hour hand of a clock, yet surely, and always towards him.

Within two paces of the gateway it suddenly stopped. The line of the wall was no longer broken. There was nothing now for the sentry to see.

A few minutes passed. The sentry muttered, growled, stamped on the

ground. After all, he could not keep warm. He had sheltered his nose and ears at the expense of his feet. Only movement could restore the circulation of those chilled members. He picked up his rifle, came out through the gateway, swung round to the right, and tramped along close to the wall.

No sooner was his back turned than the dark shape that had remained motionless at the foot of the wall glided swiftly up to and into the gateway. The sentry turned at the end of his beat, and butted with quick step against the bitter wind, approaching the gateway--and his doom. He had just passed the opening when a few inches of steel glinted in the starlight. There was a stifled groan, a sigh. The rightful owner of the watch was avenged.

Three minutes later Milosh rejoined the little group that was waiting a couple of hundred yards below.

"Well?" old Marco inquired in a whisper.

"It is well, old friend. The way is clear."

V

During the scout's absence, Burton had become acutely conscious of the bruises which he had almost forgotten. He dreaded lest his aching body should not be equal to the strain of a fight against odds. But he resolutely turned his mind from his own condition, and set himself to concert a plan of action with old Marco and Captain Enderby.

They decided that while the attack was proceeding Nuta should remain with the cart. If it succeeded, she would be brought up to the tower; if it failed, and the enemy made their appearance, the possession of Captain von Hildenheim should serve as security for the safety of herself and Enderby. A threat to shoot him would no doubt induce his party to come to terms. The expression on the woman's face as she took Enderby's revolver was sufficient guarantee that she would not fail in the part assigned to her.

Five minutes after the return of Milosh the little party set off on their adventurous enterprise.

"Good luck, old man!" said Enderby, as Burton took his leave. "Sorry I can't be with you, but we'll meet again before long."

They stole up the road in single file, Milosh leading, followed by old Marco, Burton, and the boy in succession. Reaching the wall, they crept along its shadow to the gateway, noiselessly entered the enclosure, and, after a swift glance around, sped towards the tower. The clank of bridles and the pawing of hoofs did not alarm

them; Milosh had already explained that the horses had been placed in the large chamber that formed the ground floor. To this there was no longer a door, but through the vacant doorway came a faint glint of light.

At the entrance they halted, and peered in. Ranged along the wall to the right stood the horses, which, scenting strangers, moved restlessly. In the left corner the rays of a lamp fell through an open trap-door above, lighting a rough wooden staircase. From the upper room came the sound of voices mingled with snores. At the uneasy movements of the horses the conversation ceased for a moment. A head appeared at the edge of the trap-door, and a rough voice ordered the animals to be quiet, as one might tell a dog to "lie down." Another voice from behind sleepily asked a question. The first man replied, and withdrew from the opening. Then the low-toned conversation was resumed.

There being but one entrance to the tower, and but one gateway in the wall, the single sentry whom Milosh had disposed of had no doubt been considered a sufficient guard; but old Marco had decided, leaving nothing to chance, to post his grandson at the doorway, to keep watch outside and give the alarm if any sudden interference should threaten. The boy grasped manfully the revolver given him, and stood against the wall out of the ray of light.

The others slipped silently across the room to the staircase. At its foot they halted a moment, looking up towards the trap-door. The staircase was clearly a rickety affair. Some of the treads were missing; the handrail and balusters which had formerly edged it on the outer side were now wholly removed. Signing to his companions to move carefully, Milosh began to ascend.

At his first step there was an ominous creak, masked, however, by a renewed stir among the horses. The old Serb and Burton followed in turn, treading as lightly as they could. Milosh was half-way up when, stepping over a gap, his foot came down heavily on the stair above, and the timber emitted a loud groan. The voices above ceased; then a gruff voice in the Bulgarian tongue muttered: "What was that?" Milosh hurried his ascent. A shadow fell on the men below him; something had moved at the edge of the trap-door. A cry of alarm ended in an inarticulate gasp; for the second time that night a Serbian knife had taken toll of the national enemy.

There was a loud shout from behind the fallen man, followed by confused cries from the awakened sleepers. Regardless now of any noise they might make the three men sprang up the remaining stairs. A shot rang out as Milosh flung himself into the room, with Marco close behind him, and when Burton stood upon the floor, he found himself in the thick of a furious *mêlée* that gave him no time to take in the scene.

Of the men in that upper room, only two had been awake--the Bulgarian officer and one of the troopers. When their conversation was interrupted by the

sounds from below, the trooper had leant over to see what was happening. It was he that had fallen to Milosh's knife. The shot had been fired by the officer, and the other men, aroused by the noise, had disengaged themselves from the horse rugs beneath which they had been sleeping, and were now crowding in confusion to repel the unexpected attack. Only half awake, some of them had not even seized their arms. Behind them towered the bulky form of the second German officer who had led them earlier in the day. He alone had his wits about him. Shouting orders and curses, he threw a swift glance at the three intruders, then sprang to the lamp hanging from a bracket on the wall, and dashed it to the floor.

But this move, upon which he had calculated to assist the defence, giving the men time to collect their sleep-dulled senses and regain the advantage of numbers, turned in fact to their undoing. The darkness lasted only an instant. Then Burton whipped out his electric torch. The lamp had illuminated both parties alike; but now the electric beam dazzled the eyes of the Bulgarians while leaving their assailants dim and indistinct.

Burton could never afterwards clearly recall the incidents of the fight. The hollow tower rang with shots, fierce shouts, and even more significant cries. His one abiding impression was the Berserker fury of old Marco. With knife in one hand and revolver in the other, the Serb flung himself upon the foes, his stalwart form seeming to be everywhere at once. Even his heroic ancestor could never have disposed of more of the traditional enemy in equal time. Milosh fought with the fury generated by his recent wrongs, accompanying every knife-thrust with a yell of triumph. Some of the Bulgars threw themselves down, and tried to crawl towards the trap-door. But Burton, holding his ground there, cut off their escape, and while his torch lit up the scene for his friends, he assisted them with his revolver whenever he could do so without risk to them.

Long as it appeared to those engaged in it, the struggle was in reality a short one. Taken unawares, the Bulgars were no match for their assailants, nerved by desperate necessity. At the last, when the din had somewhat diminished, Burton staggered under the impact of a large form, and saved himself from being hurled down the staircase only by a stiffening of the muscles and a dexterous back-throw over his thrust-out knee. He stooped and grappled his fallen assailant.

"I surrender!" gurgled a panting voice in German.

The officer's revolver had slipped from his grasp at the moment when, tripping over one of the Bulgars, he lurched against Burton. The latter kicked it down the staircase. There was silence now in the upper room. Burton flashed his torch around it. Marco and Milosh stood panting above their prostrate foes. It seemed that of all the party only the German officer was left alive. But the electric beam fell on one shivering wretch cowering behind a trestle table in the far corner. Milosh instantly dashed towards him, and Burton had much ado to persuade the

infuriated Serb that, the officer having surrendered, the fight was now at an end. Old Marco had sunk to the floor, exhausted by his efforts and his wounds, unheeded in the heat of the strife. The silence was broken only by the champing and pawing of the frightened horses below.

Burton was tying up the prisoners, Milosh was collecting the arms of the slain, when old Marco suddenly exclaimed--

"Monsieur, there are only eight!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a shot rang out below, and the boy's voice shouted an alarm. Leaving the others to complete his work, Burton dashed down the staircase to the doorway, just in time to see two men sprinting along beyond the wall in the direction of the waiting cart. Young Marco babbled an explanation of their presence excitedly in his own tongue, but Burton could not wait for explanations; it was enough that two of the enemy's party had been outside the tower, probably *en vedette* to the south, and were now speeding towards the north and their main body. No doubt they had heard the uproar, guessed what had happened, and run off to carry the news.

Burton at once dashed after them, anxious about the safety of his friends at the cart, even more than about the peril of the whole party if the enemy's march should be hastened. Young Marco flew along at his heels. But the fugitives had had too long a start. Even the beam of the torch failed to discover them. Immediately after the torch flashed there was the report of a revolver, and Burton ran at break-neck pace down the rugged track. He came to the cart.

"Gone away!" cried Enderby.

"You're not hurt?"

"It was Nuta's revolver. We heard some one coming, but didn't know whether friend or foe until you flashed your torch. Then I guessed. But two men were just on us then; they swerved to avoid the cart, and dashed away beyond us there. The woman was quick, but it was too dark to aim, and I'm afraid they've both got clear."

"That's a pity. They'll report that we've got the tower, and the Bulgars may swarm up in an hour or two. We must get you out of harm's way."

He made signs to Marco that he wished the cart to be driven up at once. The boy whipped up the oxen, and the vehicle lumbered away with Hildenheim trudging disconsolately behind. At the gate in the wall they met old Marco.

"Let the woman and the boy go on with your wounded friend," he said to Burton. "They cannot help us; why should we endanger them? Moreover, they would then save the goods in my cart."

"As you please," said Burton. "But you yourself will hold to your agreement, and help us to check the enemy as long as we can?"

"Assuredly, and Milosh Nikovich will remain with me."

But when the matter was put to Nuta, she resolutely refused to leave the old man.

"It is well, my daughter," he said, laying his hand on her shoulder. "We will live or die together."

This being decided, they resolved to utilise the cart in the defence of the position. The more valuable parts of its load were removed, together with the British machine-gun, and carried into the tower. The cart was then drawn across the gateway to block it up, and the oxen were taken some distance away to the south, and tethered in a bush-covered dell. Meanwhile Milosh had cleared the upper room, and made some effort to obliterate the traces of the fray. There the party took up their quarters. They were all utterly weary. It was perhaps unlikely that the enemy would arrive before the morning, but Burton and the two Serbs arranged to take turns at watching through the night. What preparations could be made to meet an attack must be left until at least a partial rest had restored their exhausted energies.

VI

There was little conversation during the night. Every member of the party was so fatigued that, when not on watch, he slept heavily. Enderby alone was wakeful, from the pain of his wounds, and he addressed Burton only in occasional whispers, lest Hildenheim should overhear him. The two German officers conversed in their own tongue, pitching their voices low; but neither of the Englishmen understood German. At intervals the distant boom of heavy guns indicated that a night attack was in progress somewhere to the east.

Before daybreak Burton roused his companions. It was necessary to lay their plans in readiness for the expected advance of the Bulgarian troops. In company with old Marco, Burton took stock of their resources. They had the weapons of their enemies--ten rifles with about two thousand rounds of ammunition, three revolvers with thirty rounds apiece, their own machine-gun with three ammunition belts. There was a plentiful supply of provisions, but little fodder for the horses. Burton was tempted to make good their escape while there was yet time; but after a few moments' reflection he reverted to his purpose of delaying the enemy's advance to the last minute of endurance. The tower, commanding the narrow track, offered great advantages to the defence; and guessing that the Bulgars' advance guard would consist of cavalry unprovided with artillery, he hoped to be able to hold his own until help arrived.

The first necessity was to inform the British general of the anticipated flank attack.

"Your grandson can ride a horse?" he asked old Marco.

"Tchk! The boy sat a horse as soon as he could walk," replied the old man, with a laugh.

"Then I want to send him with a note to our men. Will you instruct him?"

He wrote in his pocket-book a note explaining that Captain Enderby, wounded, with himself and two Serbians, both slightly wounded, were holding a tower in the hills some ten miles south of Strumitza. They expected to be attacked by a Bulgarian column moving south-west across the hills to cut the British line of retreat, and would hold out as long as possible. Their greatest need, if attacked in force, would be ammunition; and he pointed out that the position would be hopeless against artillery. Tearing the leaf out, he folded it, addressed it to "Any British Officer," and gave it to Marco, who tucked it inside his tunic. As soon as dawn glimmered the boy mounted one of the horses and set off, disappearing into the mist.

"We had better take the horses out," Burton suggested. "They will only hamper us here; besides, we may as well keep them alive if we can."

On old Marco agreeing, Milosh led the horses to the dell where the oxen had been tethered overnight, tied them together, and hobbled them to heavy fragments of rock. Meanwhile the others strengthened the cart barricade, blocked up the entrance to the tower with stones, broken timber, and other rubbish, and placed the machine-gun at a narrow window commanding the track. Then Burton climbed the ladder leading to the top of the tower, to examine the country through his glasses; but the heavy white mist hid everything from view. Guns boomed incessantly; the sounds were little louder than they had been in the night. It was clear that the British retirement was being conducted without hurry.

When he came down he found that Nuta had got ready a meal for his party and the three prisoners. With these latter, since his arrival at the tower, he had had no conversation. Now, however, Captain von Hildenheim addressed him.

"Major Schwartzkopf demands to know vat you do," he said. "Ze major shpeak no English."

Burton glanced at the elder German, who stared at him with mingled insolence and sullenness.

"Tell him that I hope before the day is out to hand him over to the British provost-marshal," he said.

Hildenheim translated. The major gurgled out a rapid sentence.

"You mistake," Hildenheim went on. "Major Schwartzkopf vish to know vat you do here."

"That is my business. If the major has patience he will see."

The Germans talked together, and Burton gathered from their smiles that they supposed him ignorant of the Bulgarian advance, and flattered themselves that the tables would soon be turned on him.

When breakfast was finished, Marco asked Burton to accompany him to the chamber below.

"Twenty years ago," he said, "when I was here, we kept a few prisoners in a cellar below the floor. Shall we not place our prisoners there now, for safety's sake?"

"Let us have a look at it," Burton returned.

Scraping away the litter of hay, earth, and fragments of wood from a corner of the floor, Marco disclosed a trap-door. They lifted this, and Burton descended a short ladder, Marco following him with an improvised torch. They found themselves in a shallow cellar, stuffy but dry.

"What is this?" exclaimed Marco, pointing to a number of small wooden boxes ranged along one wall. "They were not here in my time."

The boxes were thickly covered with dust, and had evidently been long undisturbed. Burton carefully prised up the lid of one of them.

"It is full of sticks of dynamite!" he said, astonished. "A strange find, upon my word!"

[image]

"'A STRANGE FIND, UPON MY WORD!'"

"And look!" added Marco. "There is a tunnel--that was not here either."

In one of the walls was an opening about four feet high. Entering this, the two men groped their way along a straight tunnel just wide enough for them to pass in single file.

"This must have been made by the Greeks when they held the tower," the old man continued.

"For what purpose? There's nothing in it."

"But there is the dynamite in the cellar behind. I think the tunnel must have been intended for a mine."

"To blow up something outside? Let us see in what direction it goes."

A glance at his compass showed him that the tunnel ran towards the north-east.

"It is plain," said Marco. "Here at the end we may be standing beneath the track. The Greeks intended to blow it up. I suppose the necessity passed when the Turks retreated, and the dynamite was left here and forgotten. Perhaps the

Greeks who made the tunnel were killed in the fighting afterwards."

"Well, this may be a lucky find for us. We must see if it does end beneath the track."

Measuring his paces as they returned to the cellar, he went up, and counted an equal number from the doorway of the tower, following the direction of the tunnel as nearly as he could judge it. The thirty-second pace brought him to the wall; there were still nine more to take. At the forty-first he arrived at the centre of the track.

"You were right," he said; "the intention was clearly to have a means of blowing up the track. As you say, an explosion just there would make it impassable. This may be a lucky find for us, my friend. We must remove the dynamite to the end of the tunnel, and make some sort of fuse."

They returned to the tower. It was now half-past nine, the mist was thinning, and before taking in hand the preparation of the mine, Burton thought it well to make another survey from the top of the tower. With Marco he climbed the ladder. Even with the naked eye he was able to see, winding like a serpent across the white plain, a long column of troops, its rear merging into the mist. Through his glasses he distinguished its composition. In advance of the main body of infantry rode squadrons of cavalry. Here and there appeared files of pack-mules. He handed the glasses to Marco, whose face gloomed as he watched the unending stream.

"The mules carry mountain guns," he said. "That's bad. They are coming on quickly, too. We shall not have time to prepare our mine."

But as they went down again, to make final preparations for meeting the impending attack, an idea occurred to him. Taking Marco to the lower floor, he said in English, loud enough to be heard by the prisoners above--

"A bomb would blow us all to smithereens. I had no idea there was so much dynamite there."

The Germans instantly rose to the bait. They could be heard in excited discussion above. Waiting a few minutes to allow his words to produce their full effect, Burton returned to the upper room. The officers broke off their conversation and looked at him uneasily.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Hildenheim at length, hesitatingly. "You shpeak of dynamite?"

"I did, yes--there is a considerable quantity in the cellar below."

Looking very grave, Hildenheim translated to his companion, whose alarm found vent in impassioned volubility.

"Major Schwartzkopf protests viz indignation," Hildenheim went on. "Ve are prisoners--so; but ze law of nations do not permit zat prisoners be confined in a place of danger."

"Danger, gentlemen! It was you who chose this place. What danger do you anticipate?"

"Our allies ze Bulgars zis vay come. Not understand? Zey attack zis place. Ve sit on high explosive below; ze Bulgars shoot high explosive above; ve are blowed to--vat you call it?--schmiddereens!"

"Surely your allies love you too well; they will not subject you to such risks."

"I know not so much about zat. Zey love us--yes; but if it is zeir duty zey blow us up all ze same."

"We shall all be in the same boat, then. But perhaps you have something to suggest?"

"It is ze law of nations zat you keep us safe."

"You are quite safe so far as we are concerned. Obviously I cannot remove you. If your friends shell us--well!"

"But you can remove ze dynamite. You can take it out, inter it, shuck it into--vat you call it?--a gully."

"We haven't time for that. But I have an idea. There is a long tunnel leading from the cellar. If you and your companions care to carry the dynamite to the farther end of the tunnel, it will be out of harm's way so far as the tower is concerned."

"Zat is not ze vork of German officers."

"No; quite so. If I were you I wouldn't do it. But, as you may have gathered, I intend to hold the tower as long as I can. Your cavalry is already on the move. It will not be long before they attack. If you care to remove the dynamite, you may stay in the cellar until--until I fetch you out. Otherwise you will remain here."

The Germans consulted.

"Ze Herr Major agree, viz protest," said Hildenheim presently.

"Agrees! To what?"

"To move ze dynamite--vat you ask."

"I beg your pardon, I ask nothing. You will do as you please. I said if I were you----"

"Ach! Ze Herr Major agree all ze same," interrupted Hildenheim, eagerly.

"Very well."

The Germans struggled to their feet.

"You shall unbind our arms," said Hildenheim.

"When you are in the cellar. Watch your footing as you go down."

He preceded them down the stairs. When the three men were in the cellar he left them his torch to work by, instructing them to carry the boxes to the end of the tunnel.

It was necessary to devise a train for exploding the dynamite at the pinch of necessity. Having no gunpowder this was a difficulty until Marco hit on a method.

He bade Nuta bring some cotton cloths and some jars of grease that were among their belongings in the cart. The cloths he asked her to tear up into thin strips, and then to soak thoroughly with the grease. By knotting these strips together she could make, he hoped, a match as long as the tunnel.

There was no time to test it, or to judge how quickly it would burn. Scarcely ten minutes after the woman had begun her task Burton saw, from the loophole at which the machine-gun had been placed, the head of the enemy column appear on the track within effective rifle range. It consisted of a half-troop of cavalry, and was moving with cautious slowness. In another minute it came to a halt. Two officers in front held a consultation. One of them peered through his glasses at the silent tower. Their attitude suggested uncertainty. The lack of signals from the tower must have apprised them that their friends were not in possession of it; but the information conveyed by the men who had escaped overnight was necessarily vague, and they were ignorant whether the position was held by their foes, or had been abandoned.

At the window, but out of sight of the enemy, Burton and the two Serbs watched them keenly. Enderby had been placed at the remote end of the room, behind a barricade of timber, accoutrements, and rugs. In the last few moments Burton had discussed with him whether it would be well to open a parley with the enemy, and announce his intention of disputing their passage.

"My advice is to the contrary," said Enderby. "Deeds, not words. A shot will tell them all you wish them to know."

The consultation on the track came to an end, and the horsemen began to move forward slowly. Two of them, one apparently an officer, rode a little in advance of the rest. When they were still about half a mile distant, Marco raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired. Apparently he missed, for the two men instantly threw themselves from their horses and took cover among the rocks at the side of the track. A bugle rang out, and all down the column, as far as it was in sight, the troopers dismounted, left their horses, and advanced up the track on foot by short rushes from one patch of cover to another.

"What will they do?" Burton asked himself. He tried to put himself mentally in their position. All the information they could have was that the tower was in enemy hands. They could not know who its captors were, or how many they numbered. No doubt they would suppose that the patrol had fallen to a superior force, but they would infer that this force was a comparatively small one, since it was already clear that no attempt was to be made to dispute their passage on the track itself. Their natural course would be to feel the strength of the garrison, and perhaps to refrain from throwing themselves against a strong defensive position until they had brought up guns to bombard it. The wild and rugged nature of the ground made rapid movement difficult, and Burton hoped that the inevitable delay

would not only enable the British Army to secure its retirement, but would also give time for the dispatch of a light force to bring off himself and his party. The latter event he did not count on; it might prove to be impracticable; in that case he could only look forward to the ultimate capture or destruction of the tower. It was his resolve to hold up the enemy till the last possible moment; if surrender were then necessary to save Nuta and Captain Enderby, he would at least have the satisfaction of duty well done.

Up to the present Marco's shot had been the only one fired. The two Serbs, if left to themselves, would have aimed again and again at the Bulgars, of whom they caught glimpses as they darted from rock to rock. But Burton prevailed on them to withhold their fire.

"They don't know exactly how we are placed," he said to Marco, "and we may as well keep them ignorant as long as possible. They are bound to leave cover if they mean to attack us; then will be our chance."

The position gave incomparable advantages to the defence. Standing on a spur of the hillside, the tower could be assailed only from the track; its rear face overhung a precipitous cliff which not even a goat could scale. For more than a hundred yards from the tower the track was wholly devoid of cover; the declivity on the one side and the high jagged ground on the other equally forbade an encircling movement. Burton's hope grew high as he weighed the chances for and against him.

The enemy had crept up to within about three hundred yards of the tower. The next fifty yards of the track were exposed, then there was a break in the bank in which they could find cover among low boulders and stunted bushes. It was at this point that they would first come in sight of the wall surrounding the tower enclosure. Burton concluded that as their mission was urgent, they would not wait the arrival of their artillery, which no doubt they had sent for at the first alarm, but would dash along the exposed portions of the track, shelter themselves temporarily below the wall, and then endeavour to carry the position with a rush. The gateway was blocked by the cart, but the wall could easily be scaled, and the slender defences of the tower entrance would yield in a few minutes. It was of prime importance, therefore, that the enemy should be prevented from reaching the wall. The track was wide enough for four or five men to move abreast. By means of the machine-gun, Burton could mow the enemy down if they advanced in mass; but having very little ammunition for it, he had decided to use it only as a last resource. In the early stages of the impending action he must depend on rifle fire, and he realised that, with no more than three rifles, a great deal depended on the extent to which the enemy could be intimidated. Personally he was at a disadvantage in respect of his unfamiliarity with the Bulgarian rifle. Marco had explained to him the sighting arrangements, which were adjusted to the metre

scale; but he recognised that his first shots would be experimental. At short range he could hardly fail of success.

Some minutes passed; the enemy gave no sign of movement.

"Keep your eye upon them, while I go and see how the prisoners are getting on with their work," said Burton to Marco.

He went down to the cellar, observing on the way that Nuta had completed a large coil of the cotton rope. The Bulgar was staggering into the tunnel with the last of the boxes of dynamite. Hildenheim was donning his tunic, which he had stripped off for the sake of ease in working. From the coolness and the unsoiled appearance of Major Schwartzkopf, Burton inferred, with secret amusement, that that officer had not put himself to any exertion.

"I zink I hear a shot, sir," said Hildenheim.

"I thought so too," rejoined Burton. "But we are not engaged with your friends yet, and as I see that all the dynamite is removed, you are safe here--for the present."

"So! I know ze Bulgar language. Ven our allies haf ze tower taken, I vill haf much pleasure to--vat you call it?"

"Interpret for us? Thank you, captain. I am sure you are anxious to be useful."

The dull reports of two rifle-shots recalled him. As he closed down the trap-door, he heard Schwartzkopf guffaw. Springing up the stairs he rushed to the window, where the Serbs were now firing steadily, seized his rifle, and looked down the track. A small party of the enemy had broken cover, and were rushing uphill in irregular formation. Several had already fallen; one dropped to Burton's first shot; but the rest gained the cover of the stunted bushes before mentioned.

"How many have got through?" asked Burton.

"About half-a-dozen," Marco replied.

"They haven't answered your fire?"

He had hardly spoken when a hail of bullets pattered on the stone walls. Some had come from the advanced party in the bushes, some from their comrades concealed farther down the track. One flew through the window, and struck the wall a few feet above Enderby's head. The three men drew back.

"It is clear they have discovered where we are firing from," said Burton. "We had better give them the next shots from the roof. There are loopholes in the parapet."

They climbed up the ladder, and, kneeling behind the parapet, peered through the loopholes. For some minutes the enemy continued to fire at the window without exposing themselves. Presently, under cover of their shots, a second party, larger than the first, emerged from the rocks far down the track, and ran up to join their fellows hidden among the bushes. Instantly the three men opened

fire; one after another the Bulgars fell, but eight or nine reached shelter in safety. The enemy's fire redoubled in violence; apparently they supposed that the defenders were shooting both from the window and from the roof, for Enderby called up that bullets were flying into the room, and at the same time splinters of stone were struck from the parapet.

Suddenly the firing ceased. Burton, looking through his glasses, saw reinforcements hurrying up along the track far below. Clearly the attack was to be pressed, and the worst was yet to come. So far he was well satisfied. The enemy had been held up for more than an hour; every minute gained might be of priceless service to the British forces. Every now and again the dull boom of artillery from the south told him that his comrades were still fighting a rearguard action against heavy odds. To prevent the enlargement of those odds was worth any sacrifice.

Burton realised that as yet he had had to deal with only a small advanced guard. The fight would take on quite a different complexion when the main body now pressing forward came into action. There was no sign of irresolution in the enemy. Even though he should sweep the track twice or thrice with the machine-gun, they would then discover that his ammunition was expended, and three rifles would avail nothing against the numbers who would pour upwards to the assault. It was time to prepare to play his last card--to light the train which, after an unknown interval, would explode the dynamite and render the track impassable. The tower was doomed. If not carried by assault, it would be shattered as soon as artillery was brought to bear on it. But even though it were destroyed, and all in it, the destruction of the track would delay the enemy for many hours, and his object would be gained.

He inferred, and rightly, as it proved, that the lull would continue until the enemy had come up in sufficient strength to burst through at all costs. But there was no time to spare, especially as so much uncertainty attended the action of the mine. Leaving the two Serbs to keep watch, Burton went below. Nuta was still knotting the lengths of cloth, but he saw at a glance that the coil she had completed would suffice. He made her understand by signs that she was to follow him to the cellar, carrying the revolver.

The eager looks with which the prisoners met him bespoke their confidence that he had come to beg their intercession with victorious Bulgarians. They were immediately undeceived.

"I am going to fire the dynamite," he said. "This place will no longer be safe for you. You must quit the tower. Follow my instructions to the letter. When you leave the entrance, you will cross the enclosure to the wall on the south side, climb it, and go as far along the track southward as you please. If you attempt to move in the opposite direction you will instantly be shot. That is quite clear?"

Hildenheim's looks had grown blacker and blacker as Burton spoke.

"It is a trick!" he burst out in a voice hoarse with rage. "It is against ze law of nations. Zere shall be reprisals. You make var prisoners vork to blow up zeir allies; you----"

"Nothing of the sort," Burton interrupted sharply. "You removed the dynamite for your own safety; you are at liberty to bring it back, and take the consequences. You must decide at once."

This reduced the German to silence.

"Was giebt es?" asked Schwartzkopf, evidently puzzled by the captain's agitation.

When Hildenheim had explained, the major came to a decision with great alacrity. It would be absurd to reject the chance of escaping with a whole skin. There was a short excited colloquy between the two Germans. Then Hildenheim sullenly announced their acquiescence, and they followed Burton and the woman up the stairs. When a passage had been opened in the entrance, the three prisoners made to issue together.

"Not so fast--one at a time, if you please," said Burton, anxious not to leave the tower himself. "The major first; turn to the right, that's your way. The woman will escort you."

At another time he might have been amused at the sight of the German hastening towards the wall with an effort to maintain his dignity, Nuta following with pointed revolver a couple of yards behind. But the situation was too tense for amusement. He was on thorns; at any moment warning shots might recall him to his post, and the mine had still to be completed. The instant the Bulgar, last of the three, reached the wall, Burton hurried into the cellar. He laid the cotton train on the floor of the tunnel, kindling its nearer end. At the farther end he upturned the open box of dynamite, placed a few cartridges at the extremity of the train, and packed the remaining boxes closely one upon another, so that the space between the floor and the roof was completely blocked. Then with feverish haste he scraped up loose earth from the floor, and dug stones out of the wall with his knife, and heaped them up against the boxes, so as to minimise the effect of the explosion towards the cellar. On his return he saw that the cotton appeared to be burning satisfactorily, and regained the roof of the tower after an absence of little more than twenty minutes.

The situation had apparently not changed. All was quiet. None of the enemy in the vicinity of the tower were in sight, but the columns were steadily rolling up the track in the far distance. A little later, however, there was a sudden rush from behind the rocks, accompanied by a hot fusillade. Bulgarian infantry swarmed up the track, and though many of them fell to the three rifles, many more got through, stumbling over the bodies of the fallen, and joined their comrades in the

shelter of the bushes. Nuta had come up, and as the rifles became hot, she replaced them with fresh weapons.

The enemy advanced in an unending stream for five or six minutes. The crackle of rifle shots mingled with shouts and screams. Then at the blast of a whistle all movement ceased.

Burton calculated that at least sixty men had run the gauntlet and were now waiting among the bushes. Only about a hundred yards of open track separated them from the wall of the enclosure. To check the coming dash with three rifles would be impossible. Would the explosion in the tunnel happen in time? He dared not go below again to see how the train was burning, nor could any one else be spared. Suppose the mine failed? The rush must be checked somehow; nothing but the machine-gun would avail.

Leaving the Serbs on the roof, Burton went down into the room, and placed himself at the gun.

He had not long to wait. A whistle sounded shrilly. The men dashed from the cover of the bushes and poured up towards the tower, shouting and cheering. Behind them their comrades opened fire from the rocks. Burton held his hand for a few seconds. Then, when the foremost rank had covered about half the distance, the machine-gun rapped out a hail of bullets. In a few seconds the track was swept clear as by an invisible scythe.

Silence fell again. It was clear that the enemy had not reckoned with a machine-gun, for though, taking advantage of the charge, another body of men had rushed up to the bushes from the rear, they made no attempt to advance farther.

Minute by minute passed. Except for occasional sniping, the enemy took no action. But the lull seemed ominous, and Burton remained keenly on guard, keeping a look-out from behind the shield of the machine-gun.

"I don't like it," he said to Enderby once. "There isn't much doubt that they have sent word to their gunners, and we shall soon have shells hurtling upon us. There may be just time to carry you down and put you in safety beyond the tower."

"Nonsense!" Enderby returned. "It makes me sick to be idling here. I won't go and keep your Germans company. My arms are sound enough, and, hang it all! I won't stand this any longer. Lift me out, and give me a rifle."

"No, no! Anything rather than that. At this window you'd be potted to a certainty. Perhaps it's better as it is, for if you were outside, and the rest of us were smashed, you couldn't get away."

"And I'd rather peg out than fall a prisoner to those German-led Bulgars. Don't worry, old chap!"

"That wretched mine must have failed," said Burton, presently. "Nuta must go and relight the train."

But just as he was rising to call her, he noticed something far down the track that caused him to drop back again.

"They're smuggling a machine-gun into position!" he cried.

He had caught a glimpse of the barrel projecting over a ledge of rock. With instant decision he trained his own gun upon it, and before it could open fire, he pumped out a hail of lead that struck it from its position, and the men serving it, in spite of their shield, were killed or disabled either by direct shots, ricochets, or splinters.

"One belt empty!" he said, as he replaced it with a full one. "By George! Now we're in for it!"

He had heard the characteristic scream of a shell. Immediately afterwards there was a terrific explosion, and he saw a tall column of smoke, stones, and dust shoot into the air from the rocks not two hundred yards away. In another half-minute another shell exploded, a little nearer.

"They must be 'phoning the range," he said. "Look here, Enderby, I must get you out of it. I can't leave the machine-gun now, but the Serbs must carry you away. Marco Kralevich!" he shouted.

The old man hurried down.

"They'll have the range in a few minutes," said Burton. "I want you and your friend to carry Captain Enderby out along the track yonder, towards where the prisoners are. Take your daughter, too. When you come back, go down into the cellar and relight the train; it must have gone out. They will smash the tower; the only chance of holding them up is to explode the mine. Make haste, for Heaven's sake!"

Marco summoned Nuta and Milosh from the roof. They lifted Enderby, and were half-way down the stairs with him when the Bulgarian gunners made their first hit. A shell carried away a corner of the parapet. The tower shook under the explosion, and the falling masonry plunged into the enclosure, raising a dense cloud of dust. Burton trembled for the safety of his friends, but his thoughts were taken from them by a renewed movement among the enemy. Immediately after the crash, the men concealed in the bushes sprang out, and dashed forward with a cheer. They would have been wiser to wait. Burton saw them indistinctly through the dust, but he had the range to a yard, and again they melted away under his withering fire.

Shells were now bursting around the tower. There was another crash above; fragments of stone fell into the room, striking Burton in many places. It was a moment of racking anxiety. He dared not leave the gun until the track had been destroyed, yet the tower might crumple down upon him. His ammunition was running short--would Marco get back in time? Even if he relit the train, would the flame reach the explosives? And at that crisis he nerved himself for what must

be regarded as a supreme act of self-sacrifice. If all else failed, at the last moment he must go himself into the cellar, and fire into the charge.

Deafened by the explosions that now recurred every few seconds, smothered in dust, struck by fragments of stone, half choked by fumes, he still held his place at the window. The enemy had learnt a lesson. They kept out of sight. Before long the guns would have done their work, and when the tower was in ruins the way would be clear.

"They won't charge again till we're smashed," he thought. "Now for it!"

Taking his rifle, he hurried down the stairs. At the trap-door he halted a moment. He knew the risk he was about to run. His work in the tunnel had been so hurried that the backward force of the explosion could not be wholly checked. He was taking his life in his hands; but it was the last hope. He gathered himself together. His foot was on the first step when he was brought to a halt by a rifle shot below. The next instant he was hurled back by a terrific concussion, and fell, an immense noise dinning in his ears. For a moment he lay dazed.

"Marco must have done it!" he said to himself as he staggered to his feet.

Down into the cellar he sprang, gasping in the noisome fumes. His electric torch, still gleaming, lay on the floor. Near the mouth of the tunnel he saw the heroic old Serb prostrate. He rushed to him, stooped over him. Was he yet alive? Burton could not tell. Exerting almost superhuman strength he managed to hoist the big man to his back, and staggered with him across the cellar, up the steps, and across the floor. Almost broken down under the weight of his burden, he was just reaching the entrance when there was an appalling crash. The tower tottered and collapsed, and the two men fell together.

[image]

A PERILOUS MOMENT

VII

When Burton came to himself, it was to find an officer in khaki, with the red cross of the R.A.M.C. on his sleeve, bending over him.

"That's all right!" said a cheery voice. "He'll do now!"

"Where am I? Where's Marco?" Burton asked faintly.

"The old Serb? Don't worry about him. He has concussion, but he's a tough old boy, and we'll pull him through."

"And the Bulgars?"

"Toiling like niggers to make a new track a mile from here. It's all right. Take this morphine tablet. You shall hear all you want to know, twenty-four hours from now. Rather hard luck to be knocked out twice in one day, I must say."

Young Marco, after long wandering and losing his way several times, had lighted on a part of the British rearguard and delivered his note, which passed from a subaltern through his company commander and colonel until it came to the hands of the brigadier. An examination of the map decided that officer to dispatch a regiment of light cavalry to the tower. They reached it some ten minutes after it fell, having heard the outlines of the story from Captain Enderby, whom they met a few hundred yards away, keeping an eye on the three prisoners, as he said with a smile. Milosh and Nuta, who were returning to the tower when the explosion occurred, had narrowly escaped burial in the ruins. Rushing forward through the smoke and dust, they had found the two men unconscious but alive, protected by the only half-destroyed arch of the entrance.

The shelling had ceased with the fall of the tower; the track had been rendered utterly impassable by the explosion of the mine; and before the enemy were aware of the presence of the British cavalry, and their guns again came into play, the regiment had withdrawn with Burton, his party and the prisoners, and were well on their way to the British lines.

The value of the defence of the tower was handsomely acknowledged by the brigadier. It had saved his rearguard. The Serbs were compensated for the loss of their belongings in the abandoned cart, and young Marco, besides presents given him by the British officers, found himself the happy possessor of innumerable souvenirs from the men. Old Marco, who soon recovered, received special commendation and reward for his heroism in firing the mine at the risk of his life. As for Burton, no one was more surprised than he when he learnt that his name had been sent in for the V.C.

[image]

Chapter V Heading

THE MISSING PLATOON

I

Burton rode at an easy jog trot, smoking a cigarette. He had a day off, and by way of recreation had borrowed a horse to visit the battery for which he had done a good deal of "spotting," but which he had not yet seen. His only communication with it had been by wireless from the air.

It was a fine spring afternoon--rather ominously fine, he thought, for the sunlight had that liquid brightness which often preludes dirty weather. Dust flew in clouds from the white road before the gusty wind. From somewhere ahead came the booming of guns, and now and then he saw bursts of smoke above the trenches a few miles away.

He came to a solitary house at the roadside. It was partly demolished; but in the doorway, flanked by a solid wall of sandbags, a subaltern was standing. Burton reined up.

"Officers' quarters of No. 6?" he asked laconically.

"The same," was the reply.

"My name's Burton: thought I'd come over and have a look at you."

"You're the chap, are you? Well, I'll take you round. They're all in the gun-pits, waiting orders. Take your horse round to the back: we get pip-squeaks here occasionally."

Having placed the horse in safety, Burton accompanied his guide across the road, through what had once been a market-garden, to a turfy mound resembling a small barrow, such as may be seen here and there in the south of England. But this mound in France was obviously not an ancient burial-place. There was something recent and artificial in its appearance. A deep drain encircled it, and on its western side there was a small opening, like the entrance to an Eskimo hut.

"Here we are," said his guide, Laurence Cay, second lieutenant. "Mind your head."

Burton stooped and entered. He found himself in a spacious chamber, dimly lit through the doorway and the hurdles stretched across the farther end. To him, coming from the brilliant sunlight, the interior was at first impenetrably dark; but as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, he saw the gun, clean, silent, on a bed of concrete; rows of shells placed in recesses in the walls; and the opening of a tunnel.

"That leads to our dug-out," said Cay. "We'll find some one there."

A few steps through the tunnel brought them to a large cave-like room, furnished with table and chairs, four bunks and a store cupboard. Two officers were taking a late luncheon.

"Let me introduce Burton, V.C., D.S.O., one of our spotters," said Cay. "Captain Adams, Mr. Mortimer."

"Hullo, Burton? So it's you. How d'ye do?" said the captain, shaking hands. "Haven't seen you for an age. Have a drink?"

"A cosy little place, this," said Burton, as he quaffed a mug of cider.

"H'm! Pretty fair. We're proof against anything but a 'Jack Johnson.' They haven't discovered us yet. We've had a few pip-squeaks and four-twos, by accident. We make better practice, I think."

"You missed a chance this morning."

"How's that?"

"Well, that mill, you know, just across the way--the Huns' divisional headquarters."

"Across the way! It's five miles--and a hill between!"

Burton, who knew Captain Adams of old, ignored the interruption. It was an easy amusement to "draw" Adams.

"With a little promptitude, and--h'm--accuracy, you might have bagged the whole lot; and who knows if Big or Little Willy mightn't have been there on a visit? But you were so slow getting to work that they all got away--except the cooks."

"But, hang it all! I gave the order 'Battery action' one second after we got the first call from O.P. and...."

"Yes, but your first shell plugged into a cabbage patch half a mile to the left."

"O.P. reported 300 yards," snorted the captain indignantly.

"Wanted to spare your feelings, old man. As I was saying, it only scared the Huns and gave them time to clear out. The second shell was just about as far to the right: demolished a pigsty."

"Come now, how the deuce do you know that?"

"Well, the divisional cooks started to make sauerkraut and sausage----"

At this point Adams noticed that his subalterns were writhing with the effort to contain their laughter; and perceiving at last that he was being "chipped," he caught Burton by the collar and hurled him towards one of the bunks. This was the opening move of a scrimmage which might have continued until both were breathless had not Adams suddenly remembered himself.

"Gad, Burton, this won't do!" he said. "Bad example to those young innocents" (indicating the subalterns). "Quite like old times at school, eh? But really----"

"How long have you been a captain, Adams?"

"Gazetted a fortnight ago; it came through orders a week later. Must give up skylarking now, you know. Have another drink."

They sat down, compared notes, talked over old times: the conversation became general.

"Trench raids are becoming more common," said Cay presently. "You heard what happened the other day?"

"What was that?"

"The better part of a platoon of the Rutlands is missing. They hold the trenches in front of us, you know. Well, they got up a night raid, and penetrated the Huns' first line: came back with a handful of prisoners and no casualties to speak of. But when they took stock, something over forty men of this platoon were missing."

"They went too far, I suppose, and were cut off. Very bad luck."

"If they're prisoners! Whatever happens to me, I hope I shan't be a prisoner. These raids are the order of the day now; I suppose they're useful. At any rate they give our fellows something to do."

At this moment Burton started as the words "Battery action" came from somewhere in a roar like that of a giant.

"Megaphone!" cried Adams, jumping up.

The officers rushed into the gun-pit. The men who had been working outside came racing in. In a few moments another order was shouted through a megaphone by the man in the telephone room--a shell-proof cave hard by. "Target M--one round battery fire."

Captain Adams took up a map of the German trenches, and with a rapidity that amazed Burton, angles and fuses were adjusted, and in a few seconds a shell went whistling and screaming towards its invisible target miles away. Cay had gone to the wireless instrument in the corner, and sat with the receiving telephones at his ears.

"Range right; shell dropped quarter-mile to the left," he called presently.

New adjustments were made; the gun fired again.

"How's that?" asked Adams.

It seemed only a few seconds before Cay, repeating the message he had received from the invisible aeroplane scouting aloft, replied: "Got him!" A moment later he added: "New battery----" He broke off: the burring of the instrument had ceased. He tried to get into communication again, but failed. "Ask O.P. if they've seen the 'plane," he called to the telephonist. Presently came the answer: "Went out of sight behind a wooded hill. Afraid a Hun 'Archie' has brought it down."

Meanwhile the order "Break off" had been received. The immediate task of the battery was accomplished.

II

The officers returned to their dug-out.

"Your colleague hasn't had your luck, Burton," said Adams. "It's more than a pity. He had evidently spotted a fresh battery. The Huns will have time to conceal it unless some one else spots it and tips us the wink."

They went outside and scanned the sky. No aeroplane was in sight.

"I think I'd better go up," said Burton. "I'm off duty to-day, but it would be a pity to lose the chance. The new battery must have been visible from where he saw your target. I ought to be able to find it if I go at once."

"A good idea! We might smash it before it gets to work. You'd better 'phone your flight commander. I'll lend you my trench map."

Burton hurried to the telephone room. In a few minutes he returned.

"O.K.," he said, "but I'll have to go alone. My observer's away, and there's no one else handy."

"That's awkward. You can't pilot and work the wireless too."

"Perhaps not, but if I can spot the battery I can return with my observer to-morrow, and then we'll be able to set you to work on it."

"Good! You've seen what we can do."

"Well, not exactly seen; but apparently it wasn't a pigsty this time. Look out for me in an hour or so."

He returned to the house, remounted, and rode back rapidly to the aerodrome. There he explained the circumstances at greater length to his flight commander, set the mechanics to work, and within ten minutes was ready to start.

"We're in for a storm, I fancy," said his commander as he got into his place; "but perhaps you'll be back before it breaks."

The weather had gradually changed. The sky had become thick, the air was sultry and oppressive. As Burton climbed in a wide spiral it was like going from a Turkish bath into the cooling room, fresh and exhilarating. He circled over the aerodrome until he had attained an altitude of six or seven thousand feet, then steered towards the German lines, still rising steadily. The spot for which he was making was four or five miles away. Soon the bewildering network of the British trenches glided away beneath him. Then the German trenches came into view. On the roads behind he noticed tiny black specks moving this way and that--supply wagons, no doubt, or motor-cars bringing up fresh men.

The whirr of his engine was broken into by something like the sound of a pop-gun. He looked around; a woolly ball of smoke hung in the air on his right. Immediately afterwards there were more pops, and the ball became the centre of a cluster. Burton swerved to the left, then dodged a long roll of greenish-yellow

smoke with a red tongue of flame in the centre. The German "Archies" were at work. He flew on, swinging from side to side, until he calculated that he was about three miles behind the front line of trenches. Then he turned at right angles and commenced a methodical search of the ground stretched like a patchwork quilt below him. Here was a brown patch of plough-land, then a blob of vivid green denoting grass, or one of green speckled with white--an orchard in the blossom of spring. In the distance the silvery streak of a river pursued its winding way. A train was rolling across it, like a toy train on a toy bridge.

A dark mass below him broke apart, resolving itself into individual dots. "Afraid of bombs," he thought. At the spot where the centre of the crowd had been, the ground appeared to be blackened. "Shouldn't wonder if that's the missing aeroplane," he thought. "It caught fire, or they've burnt it. But where's that new battery? Things are getting hot." Shells were bursting all about him. Now and then the machine lurched, and he looked round anxiously to see the extent of the damage. A few wires, perhaps, were hanging loose; a few rents gaped in the fabric; nothing serious as yet. But it was getting very uncomfortable.

Up and down he flew, feeling the strain of doing double work. With his map pinned down in front of him he scanned the ground for some new feature. Ah! What is that? Peering through his glasses he descries a group of men in suspicious activity about a clump of bushes. They scatter as he passes over. A shell sets the machine rocking. He swings round and soars over the spot again, even venturing to descend a few hundred feet. The clump is not marked on the map. What is that in the middle of it? The flight has carried him beyond it before he can answer the question; but he turns again, and circles over the place. There is something unnatural in the appearance of the bushes. The shells are bursting thicker than ever. Something cracks just behind his seat. But he thrills as he realises that his reconnaissance has succeeded. "The battery is hidden in that clump, or I'm a Dutchman."

He marked the spot on his map, moved the elevator, soared aloft, and steered for home, making a circuit northward to avoid an anti-aircraft gun that lay directly between him and the aerodrome. And now for the first time he was aware that the threatening storm was about to burst. The westerly wind had increased in force; the sky was blacker; huge waves of cloud were rolling eastward. He flew into the wind and tried to rise above the clouds. Suddenly Heaven's artillery thundered around him; there was a blinding flash; he was conscious of pain as though he had received a heavy blow; then for a while he was lost to all about him.

When he partly recovered his senses and tried to regain control of the machine he was in a state of bewilderment. The aeroplane was nearly upside down. He scarcely knew which was top and which bottom. He struggled to right the machine: when he succeeded, with great creaking of the controls, he was alarmed

to see that he was within a few hundred feet of the ground, above a wood. Exercising all his self-command he managed to swerve clear of the tree-tops, and in another moment or two the machine came to the ground with a bump that seemed to shake out of place every bone in his body.

Half dazed, he unstrapped himself with trembling fingers and scrambled from his seat. Rain was pouring in a deluge. The sky was black as night. His feet had just touched the sodden soil when he became aware of a number of figures rushing towards him from the undergrowth. Fumbling for his revolver, he was felled by a shrewd blow.

[image]

THE BRITISH WAY

Again he lost consciousness for a moment. Then he heard an English voice.

"You silly blighter! Couldn't you see?"

"He was going to shoot."

"Well, what of it? He couldn't hit a haystack. Didn't you see he was fair crumpled with the fall?"

"You may talk, but I wasn't going to be shot in mistake for a bloomin' Hun."

"I tell you any fool could see he was one of ours. I was sure of it. You ought to have made sure--striking your superior officer."

"Silence, you men!" called an authoritative voice. An officer had come up from the shelter of the wood. "The noise you are making can be heard a mile off. You'll bring the whole Hun army down on us."

As a matter of fact, the men had begun by speaking in stage whispers, their tones becoming louder and louder in their excitement as the altercation proceeded.

Burton rose stiffly and painfully to his feet.

"Beg pardon, sir," sheepishly muttered the man who had knocked him down. "It's raining so hard----"

"That's all right," Burton interposed. "Where am I?"

"It's you, Burton!" said the officer. "Come among the trees. You men, lug the aeroplane in; the rain's so thick that perhaps the Huns haven't seen where it fell."

"But we're in no danger in our own lines?" said Burton in surprise.

"We aren't in our own lines," rejoined the officer, dragging Burton into the wood. "We're marooned."

"Gad, Hedley, are you the missing platoon?"

"Yes; I'll tell you."

"Let me have a look at the machine first. By George! I thought I was done for."

"It was a narrow squeak. But you've always had wonderful luck. Here's the machine. What's the damage?"

Burton examined the aeroplane and gave a rueful shrug.

"Two holes in the engine cowl, a dozen in the planes, bracing wires shot away; they don't cripple her, but the worst thing is that one of the landing wheels is buckled. She's useless till that is put right."

"Well, perhaps we can get that done for you. You seem as badly crocked as the machine, and no wonder."

"But tell me, Hedley, where are we? And how did you get here?"

"Tell you by and by," said Hedley, who spoke in whispers and showed other signs of nervous apprehension. "Come on."

"But I can't leave the machine."

"You must. We can't take it with us. It won't be found while the rain lasts."

"I can't fly back unless I get this wheel straightened."

"All right. Stanbridge," he said, calling up a short, sturdily-built corporal, "get that buckled wheel off. Quick work!"

"Very good, sir."

"You'll find some tools on board," said Burton.

"And don't make a row," Hedley added.

It was the work of only a few minutes to detach the wheel. There was no conversation; everybody showed nervous impatience; two or three men kept watch at the edge of the wood.

"Now then," said Hedley.

He led the way, groping through the wood. Burton followed on his heels: he felt himself a compendium of aches. Rain was still falling. Through it could be seen the blurred lights of a distant building. A short walk brought the party to what appeared to be a thick hedge of bramble bounding a field. There was a whispered challenge.

"Potsdam," whispered Hedley in return, giving the password.

He turned, took Burton by the arm, and guided him through an opening which had suddenly disclosed itself in the bramble hedge. A sentry stood aside; the party filed in. Burton found himself moving down a sharp declivity, which by and by opened out into a spacious cave, lit by a single candle-lamp. Two or three men got up from the stools on which they had been sitting. The floor was roughly boarded. A table stood in the centre. Along one side were a number of large wooden bins.

"We sleep on them," said Hedley. "Rather stuffy quarters, you perceive."

"Concentrated essence of earth and candle smoke," said Burton, sniffing.

"Also bacon fat and the smell of our cooker. Sit down, you shall have something to eat and drink in a jiffy."

"You won't forget the wheel?"

"No. Stanbridge, get that wheel put right."

Among any score of British soldiers there will usually be found a factotum who can turn his hand to anything. It was not otherwise with these men of the Rutland Light Infantry. Having seen the work started, Hedley heaved a sigh of relief.

"Now we can talk," he said.

III

"You heard about the night raid? Well, we were completely cut off from the rest by a counter attack, from the flank. We tried to bomb our way back, lost heavily, got all muddled up. There seemed to be a whole brigade of Huns between us and our lines, so the only thing to be done was to give them the slip, and dodge around in the hope of finding a weak spot where we might break through. There are only twenty-four of us left. We managed to keep together, and were lucky enough to escape the Huns; but of course we got hopelessly lost. Just before daylight, dead beat, we stumbled into the wood yonder, not caring much what happened to us. In the early morning an old French farmer found us there. My hat! we felt pretty bad when he told us we were deep in the enemy's country, and a company of Huns billeted in his farm only half a mile away. Rummy, isn't it?--he's held on, working his farm in spite of everything, and the Huns don't seem to have bothered him much."

Here one of the men brought some freshly-fried bacon, biscuits, and light wine.

"Fall to!" Hedley went on. "It was a tremendous bit of luck, old Lumineau's finding us, because of this cave of his. It is on the outskirts of his farm, and he concealed here a lot of his spare stores when he had news that the Huns were coming up last September twelvemonth. The cave has had a history, it appears, and it's lucky again that the Huns don't know of it. The old farmer told me it used to shelter a famous band of outlaws centuries ago. During the Revolution a local nobleman's family lived in it for months. More recently it has been a store for smugglers running goods across the Belgian frontier. We're pretty safe here, though of course a strolling Hun may discover it any day, and then----"

"How did you happen to be in the wood when I came down?"

"We weren't there, but we heard your engine, and Stanbridge, who's got a wonderful ear, declared it was English, so we rushed up on the chance. If it hadn't been so dark and raining so hard, the Huns would certainly have seen or heard you; but you always had all the luck!"

"You've had a good share, anyway."

"We have, that's true. Old Lumineau has kept us well supplied, at Heaven knows what risk to himself. We're hanging on here in the hope of getting back some day. It's pretty hopeless, I expect; but I'm not going to give in till I must."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"I don't see how you can. We must trust to luck."

"When that wheel's straightened I'll fly back and report to your colonel."

"He can't do anything. Nothing short of a general push could gain this ground, and he won't risk hundreds for the sake of a score. Our only chance is to slip through when they're strafing one night; even then the odds are a hundred to one against us. Still, I dare say the C.O. would be pleased to know what's become of us, and I'll be glad if you'll tell him. But d'you think you're fit to fly back to-night after your gruelling?"

"Oh yes! I've had a bit of a shake, but a little rest will set me up. I've discovered a new battery the Huns have rigged up, and must report as soon as possible. Look: here's the spot."

He showed the mark recently made on his map.

"Good!" said Hedley, examining the map with interest. "But the Huns' trenches aren't marked so completely as on mine. Here you see we have them all plotted out: we know them as well as we know our own."

"That's useful. I say, Hedley, I don't see why we shouldn't make some practical use of your presence in the enemy's country, and get you away too."

"As for getting away, we shall have to depend on ourselves. As I said before, the C.O. won't risk hundreds for the sake of our little lot; and if he would, the Brigadier wouldn't allow it."

"I don't know. Could you make me a copy of the map so far as this neighbourhood is concerned, putting in the position of the cave?"

"Certainly: I'll scratch it in on a leaf from my order-book."

The rough drawing completed, Burton folded the paper and put it in his pocket, remarking, half in jest, half in earnest--

"If the Huns collar me, I'm afraid I'll have to eat it. Now this is my idea."

There ensued a long discussion, in the course of which Hedley passed from doubt to confidence and enthusiasm.

"Well, if you bring it off," he said in conclusion, "it'll be a tremendous score. You're a V.C. already: I don't see what more they can do for you--except make

you a lord."

"My dear fellow! ... There's just one point. I ought to have a better landing-place than that wood. After to-night's affair I shall be nervous if there are trees about. Is there anything more suitable and safe?"

Hedley considered.

"There is," he said presently, "a little farther away. Beyond the wood the ground rises: it's the nearest thing to a hill these parts can show. Then it dips into a wide grassy hollow. That's your place. I'll get old Lumineau to show three small lights there to-morrow night at eleven. In the hollow they won't be seen by the Huns: besides, I'll get him to mask them except from the sky."

"That's capital. Well, if I don't turn up by eleven or soon after you'll know that either I have been winged on the way or that the Brigadier has turned down our little entertainment. In that case, you must do the best you can on your own."

"Right, old man. What I'm most afraid of is that you won't get away safely. There's no strafing to-night, and the Huns are bound to hear your engine. You'll make more noise going up."

"But it's dark: there's no moon; and I shall be well up before they spot me."

"Let's hope so."

"What's the time?"

"Ten minutes to nine. Better wait till midnight. Take a nap."

"I will. Wake me when the time comes."

Burton was one of those lucky mortals who can sleep anywhere at any time. In a few minutes he was sleeping soundly. At midnight Hedley roused him.

"Time's up," he said. "The rain has stopped, and the sky's clear: there's just enough starlight to show you the way. I'm sending Stanbridge and a squad to replace your wheel, carry the machine out and see you off. I'd better keep on the *qui vive* here, I think."

"Good-bye, then--till to-morrow."

Following the men, Burton stole out of the cave and crept with extreme caution into the wood. The neighbourhood was quiet; the only sound was the booming of guns far away. The wheel was replaced; the 'plane was quickly dragged or lifted to the open hollow about a quarter of a mile away. Burton spent a few anxious minutes in looking over the engine by the light of his electric torch; then he strapped himself into his seat, and ordered Stanbridge to whirl the propeller while the other men clung to the rear of the machine.

"Race back like mad when I'm off," he said. "'Ware Huns!"

The engine began to roar.

"Stand clear!" he said.

The machine rolled off along the grass, gathering momentum; the tail lifted; the wheels rose clear; and she skimmed the grass like a huge bird. In a few seconds

Burton was slanting upward on the first round of his spiral course.

Ten minutes later a party of German infantry, some fully clothed, others in various stages of deshabille, rushed breathlessly over the rise into the now deserted hollow.

"I am sure," said one of them, "the first sound came from somewhere about here. Then an aeroplane rose like a big black bird above the trees. I gave the alarm the moment I heard the engine."

"You must have been dreaming, stupid," said his lieutenant, irritable at being wakened. "There was no aeroplane here at nightfall; one couldn't have gone up if it hadn't come down first, and I must have heard that. Think yourself lucky I don't report you for sleeping on duty. Feldwebel, bring the men back."

The lieutenant turned on his heel and plodded grumbling back down the hill. The glare of Verey lights, the bursting of shells in the sky westward, might have confirmed the man's story; but Lieutenant Schnauzzahn was never the man to admit himself in the wrong.

IV

A little before eleven on the following night, the Germans on that part of the front were thrown into agitation by a sudden burst of unusually violent gun-fire from the British artillery. Such a bombardment was commonly preliminary to an infantry attack, and the German soldier, though brave enough, is no longer quite easy in mind at the prospect of meeting British "Tommies." The few men in the front trenches cowered on the ground or in their dug-outs; the communication and support trenches filled up; and Verey lights illuminated the No Man's Land across which they expected the enemy to swarm when the bombardment ceased.

The deafening din and crash stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The Germans rushed into their front trenches. But there was no sign of movement on the now brightly lit space. There was no rifle fire, no bombs, no sound of cheering. All was quiet. They were puzzled. Was the attack postponed? The shelling had not lasted long enough to do very much damage. Perhaps it was intended to frighten them. None would admit that, if such were the object, it had succeeded. For a time they stood to arms, watchful, suspicious, uneasy. But the bombardment was not resumed. Nothing showed above the British parapets. They loosed off a few shots to relieve their feelings; then settled down to the weary night-work of the trenches.

At the moment when this brief bombardment opened, Burton made his as-

cent from the aerodrome behind the British lines. At the moment when it ceased he was circling behind the German lines, some 2000 feet in the air, vainly endeavouring to pick up the pre-arranged signal-lights in the hollow. His flight had been carefully timed with the bombardment; he ought to have landed under cover of the noise; but the best arrangements are apt to be nullified by the unforeseen. A mist blanketed the ground, dense enough to obscure completely any lights of less than electric intensity.

This was baffling. It was also alarming. The purring of the engine, hitherto smothered by the continuous gun-fire, must now be distinctly audible below. One searchlight had already begun to play; before long the aeroplane would be in the full glare of their intersecting rays. What should he do? To go back meant the breakdown of the whole scheme; the opportunity might not recur. Yet to land haphazard would be to court disaster; to land at all might throw him into the hands of patrols sent out to capture him.

While he was thus uneasily turning over the problem, his eyes, strained earthward, suddenly discovered three tiny points of light arranged triangularly. They as suddenly disappeared; a puff of wind had for the moment broken the mist, which had then rolled back and obscured them. But the glimpse was enough to decide him. He dropped a thousand feet, wheeling, so far as he could judge by guesswork, around the spot at which he had seen the lights. Once more he caught sight of them; they were brighter. Another searchlight was sweeping the sky: it was neck or nothing now. Keeping the lights in view, he dived steeply, coming to earth with a sharp jolt, within twenty paces of the apex of the triangle. Before the machine had lost its impetus, however, it crashed against the stump of a tree at the edge of the hollow. Burton was thrown forward in his seat; fortunately the strap prevented him from being hurled out. Recovering from the shock, he loosened the strap, climbed down, glanced around, and seeing no one, proceeded to examine the forward part of the machine. He gave a gasp of dismay. The propeller was smashed.

The consequence of the disaster immediately flashed into his mind. He could only get back in company with the Rutlands. If they failed, he would fail too.

He had just assured himself that the damage was irreparable with such appliances as were at his command in the cave, when he became aware of light footsteps rapidly approaching. Expecting to see some of the Rutlands, who had been no doubt looking out for him, he raised his head towards the crest of the rise. Next moment he was in the grasp of two men, one of whom, mouthing guttural triumph, gripped his throat in a strangle hold.

V

About half an hour before Burton started from the aerodrome, Captain Bramarbas of the 19th Pomeranian infantry of the line laid down his knife and fork with a grunt of satisfaction. He wiped his lips, tossed off a glass of wine, and turning gleaming eyes upon Lieutenant Schnauzzahn of the same regiment, who sat opposite, he ejaculated--

"Gott sei dank! These French swine have one virtue: they can cook."

"It is wonderful!" the lieutenant agreed. "Who would have thought that an old French farmer would have had such resources? Cheap, too."

"Cheap indeed!" laughed the captain. "Between you and me, old Lumineau will have difficulty in turning our paper into good German money after the war ... Ist es aber entsetzlich--the noise of those swine."

The door had just opened to admit an old woman servant bearing coffee. From the adjoining room--the spacious farm kitchen given up to the captain's men--came a guttural roar. A hundred Germans feeding like one make a variety of unpleasant noises. It is not a mere coincidence, perhaps, that the Prussian loves a pig.

The officers took their cups of coffee, lit cigars, and lolled back in their chairs. The door closed behind the servant, reducing the sounds to a muffled hum, not loud enough to disturb the comfort of gentlemen. It was a pleasant hour. The day's work was done; they were three or four miles behind the firing line; the farm was a snug billet. They had been working late; supper had taken the place of dinner: when they had finished their cigars they might go with a good German conscience to bed.

Presently there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said the captain drowsily.

A sergeant entered, and stiffly saluted.

"What do you want? It is late. I gave you your orders."

"Herr Captain, I ask pardon for disturbing you, but----"

"Waste no time, Ascher. Say what you have to say quickly, confound you!"

[image]

"Say what you have to say quickly--confound you!"

"It is important, Herr Captain. For some time I have been suspicious of the farmer, as the Herr Captain knows, though he does not condescend to share my

doubts. True, the farmer, though a Frenchman, is very obliging" (here the sergeant glanced for a moment at the remains on the table), "but I felt that his amiability was a mere blind, and I watched him."

"Ha! Now what did you see?" said the captain, sitting up. "If there is treachery----"

"Once or twice at night the farmer has gone out towards the wood yonder. I asked myself, why? There is no farm work at night. To-night I followed him. It was difficult, Herr Captain, for he moved very cautiously, stopping and looking behind and around him."

"That itself is suspicious. Well?"

"He made his way beyond the wood, up the hill, and down into the hollow on the other side, and there, Herr Captain, he placed three small lamps on the ground, so." He moved to the table, and arranged three bottles triangularly. "He lit them."

"And you? You seized him, of course?"

"I thought of doing so, Herr Captain, and of demanding an explanation; but I felt it was a matter for the Herr Captain's discretion----"

"And you left him! Idiot! They were signals, of course. You ought to have put them out, tied him up, and brought him to me in the morning. Now I lose an hour's sleep. Idiot!"

Captain Bramarbas was active enough now. He got up, buckled his belt and put on his helmet.

"Come, Schnauzzahn," he said, "we will see to this ourselves."

"Why not send a squad?" suggested the lieutenant.

"Ach! the swine are probably drunk. They are dull fools at the best. Come along! We'll slip out through the window, to avoid warning the servants."

The two officers and the sergeant climbed out of the window and hastened towards the hill. They had scarcely gone when the servant who had waited on them knocked at the door, and receiving no answer, hearing no voices, quickly opened it and looked in. She glanced from the vacant chairs to the open window.

"Eh, mon Dieu!" she muttered, and closing the door, hurried back to the kitchen.

The three Germans had covered about half the distance to the hill when the sound of heavy firing from the right broke upon their ears. They stopped, and stood for a few moments watching the shells bursting in rapid succession in the neighbourhood of the trenches. The captain swore.

"It looks like an attack," he growled. "These cursed English! We must make haste in case we are called up in support. No sleep to-night, Schnauzzahn."

They hurried on, and in five minutes more were creeping up the low incline. At the crest they halted and peered into the hollow. A figure was bending over

one of the lamps, which emitted a brighter light into the mist.

"Go and capture him, Ascher," whispered the captain.

"Shall I bayonet him, Herr Captain?"

"No; we must use him. We can shoot him later."

The sergeant crept silently upon the old farmer from the rear. It was the work of a few seconds to overpower him and cast him helpless on the ground.

The two officers went forward. As they descended the slope they became aware that the lights were less visible.

"They're intended as signals to an aeroplane," said Schnauzzahn, approaching them rapidly. "See! They are directed above."

"Villainous treachery! But our good German wits will defeat it. Listen! Do you hear an engine?"

"No," replied the lieutenant after a brief silence.

"Then we have still time. Ascher, move the lamps near the slope. We'll spoil his landing!"

The sergeant carried the lamps to the foot of the slope, and placed them close together.

"Not so, idiot!" cried the captain, "arrange them as they were before. Don't you understand?"

Hardly had the lamps been rearranged in their triangular position when the whirring of an engine was heard through the thunder of the distant guns.

"Here he is!" said Bramarbas. "I hope he'll break his neck. If he doesn't, you and I will seize him, Schnauzzahn; Ascher will guard the farmer."

They waited. The aeroplane could be heard wheeling above. The bombardment suddenly ceased.

"The English have changed their minds. They can't have done much harm in ten minutes. So much the better!" said the captain. The searchlights began to play. "Potztausend! I hope he won't be shot down. Much better for us to capture him. Can he see the lights through the mist?"

"No doubt he has seen them. The sound has stopped. He has shut off the engine."

"Bring the Frenchman over the crest, Ascher, and don't let him cry out."

Thus it happened that Burton, after his unlucky accident, found himself in the grasp of Captain Bramarbas and Lieutenant Schnauzzahn of the 19th Pomeranian infantry of the line.

The German officers were mightily pleased with themselves. They had supped well: French cooking and French wine predisposed them to rosy views. Nothing more delightful could have crowned their day. A French spy, an English aeroplane and an English airman--all in a single haul! The Iron Cross had often been awarded for much less. And, of course, there was something behind it all.

An enemy aeroplane would not land thus in the German lines unless there was some important object to be gained. The English, no doubt, were mad; but after all there was method in their madness. The next move must be to discover the nature of this Englishman's scheme, and his means of communication with the farmer spy. Then compliments, promotion, and the Iron Cross!

Some such thoughts as these raced through the Germans' minds in the moment of exultation, when, for the first time, their hands laid hold of English flesh.

"Hand over your revolver," said the captain in German. "Do you speak German?"

"No," said Burton, making no resistance as Schnauzzahn relieved him of the weapon. He felt very wretched.

Captain Bramarbas was disappointed. Neither he nor his lieutenant spoke English, and it did not occur to him for the moment that the Englishman might speak French.

"We'll march our prisoners down to the farm," he said to Schnauzzahn.

"Wait a moment. They may have accomplices who will remove or destroy the aeroplane as soon as our backs are turned. That would be a pity."

"What then? If one of us stays to guard the machine, and there are accomplices, he would have to meet an unknown number single-handed."

He stood pointing his revolver at Burton. They must find a way out of this quandary.

"Why not send Ascher to the farm to bring up some men?"

"Again, he might be sprung upon by the enemy. Of course, they would have no chance in the end, but for the present, until we know more, we had better remain all three together. Listen! Do you hear anything?"

"No."

"They may be lurking somewhere to take us unawares, though how they could conceive such a scheme, so mad, so insolent---- Ach! I have it."

The captain had indeed at last made up his mind--and, as the sequel showed, chosen the wrong course. It was, perhaps, no worse than another, for it was chosen in ignorance of the circumstances; but his calculation sprang from a typically German misconception of the psychology of an Englishman.

A sentry was always on duty at the door of the farm. A couple of revolver shots would give him the alarm, and in a few minutes the Pomeranians, swine in their hours of ease, but good soldiers nevertheless, would rush to their captain's assistance.

Burton stood motionless. Schnauzzahn was a little to his left. Bramarbas faced him, holding the revolver. The captain suddenly fired off two rapid shots, moving the revolver to the right so as to avoid hitting his prisoner.

The airman's life is punctuated by swift decisions, depends on the perfect

co-ordination of act with thought. Burton's mind worked quicker than lightning. Before the German had time to cover him again, he shot out his right arm, rigid as a rod of metal, struck up the captain's wrist with a sharp jerk that sent the revolver flying, and a fraction of a second later dealt him with the left fist a fierce upper cut beneath the jaw, and lifted him into the bushes.

A bullet scorched Burton's cheek as he spun round to deal with Schnauzzahn. Another stung his left shoulder. But he hurled himself upon the agitated lieutenant, and with a sledge-hammer blow sent him to join his captain.

There was now only the sergeant to dispose of. That worthy stood over the prostrate farmer some little distance away, and though he had heard the thudding blow and the crash as each of his superiors fell, he had not clearly seen what had happened. Burton was dashing towards him when a Verey light illumined the scene. And then the sergeant was transfixed with amazement and terror, for on one side of him he saw the figure of a British airman, on the other, sprinting up towards the lip of the hollow, a score of silent forms in the well-known khaki. Ordinarily, no doubt, he was a brave man, but at such a moment as this valour melted in discretion. He flung up his hands.

[image]

HANDS UP!

The German officers meanwhile had picked themselves up. They were surrounded and seized. The light had died away.

"Quick!" said Hedley. "I hear the Huns rushing out of the farm. Where's Lumineau?"

The farmer had risen, and came to him.

"Get away to the cave," said Burton. "I'll be after you in a second: must fire the machine."

He rushed to the aeroplane, poured some petrol out and applied a match, and as the flame shot up into the air, dashed after the Rutlands and their three prisoners, who, under the guidance of the farmer, were disappearing into the wood. Five minutes later, when the Pomeranians arrived on the scene, their amazed eyes beheld only a blazing aeroplane; not a man was in sight.

Arriving at the cave, the panting Englishmen threw themselves down; some laughed silently; the spectacle of three gagged Germans was very pleasing.

"What brought you up so opportunely?" asked Burton. "Not the shots? There wasn't time."

"No. Old Jacqueline warned us. She missed the officers, saw the open win-

dow, and guessed that they had got on the track of Lumineau. Trust a Frenchwoman's wits! But I say, what's your news?"

"It couldn't be better. The Brigadier, as it happened, had ordered an attack on the German trenches for to-night. When your C.O. explained the circumstances, he was quite keen to fit his arrangements to our scheme."

"That bombardment wasn't bluff, then?"

"He timed it to give me cover, and broke off to delude the Huns. The attack is fixed for two o'clock, when they'll have given up expecting it."

"That leaves us plenty of time to get to the trenches. It'll be ticklish work, getting through. I'll tell old Lumineau: we depend on his guidance. If he declines the job we shall be horribly handicapped."

He took the farmer apart, and held a quiet conversation with him. The old man readily agreed to guide the party to the vicinity of the third line of trenches.

"But you'll come with us all the way?" said Hedley. "The farm won't be safe for you after this. You'll be shot."

Lumineau shrugged and smiled.

"Perhaps not, monsieur," he said. "The Bosches did not see us; they will only be puzzled. I will go now back to the farm; do you see my amazement when they tell me their officers have disappeared? I will lead a search--not in this direction, par exemple!--and I will come back in good time to lead you. A bas les Bosches."

VI

Some few days later, Lieutenant Hedley was dispensing hospitality to a few friends in a neat little officers' estaminet in a village behind the lines. Among his guests were Captain Adams and other officers of the Rutlands' supporting battery, and Burton of the Flying Corps.

"It took us about forty minutes to smash that battery you spotted, Burton," said Adams, with an air of pride.

"Better than pig-killing," returned Burton solemnly.

"Oh, we cut up a few pigs too."

"How do you know?" asked Hedley.

"Well, you see, in the first place," Adams was beginning earnestly, when Laurence Cay interrupted him.

"We haven't time for firstly, secondly, thirdly, old man. We want to hear about Hedley and his missing platoon. By George! it must have been creepy work."

"A good deal of it was literally creeping," said Hedley. "Old Farmer Lumineau led us through woods and orchards for miles--a roundabout way, of course. It was ghastly, trudging along in the dark, trying to make no noise, afraid to whisper, stopping to listen, starting at the least sound. We got at last to a little copse just behind the farthermost line of trenches, and there Lumineau left us. We were on thorns, I can tell you. It seemed that the attack would never begin. We couldn't hear any Huns anywhere near us, but caught a note of a cornet now and then from some billet on our left rear. I looked at my trench map----"

"In the dark?" asked Adams.

"No, you juggins! in the light of my electric torch, screened by the men stooping over me. I got a pretty good idea of our whereabouts, and talked over a plan of action with my sergeant--a capital fellow--and Burton. I nearly yelled in sheer excitement when I heard the row as our chaps started bombing the first trenches. We heard the Huns then, too; rifles, machine-guns, whizz-bangs: it was an inferno. We crept out into the communication trench I had spotted, and had nearly got to the second line when we heard a crowd of Huns racing across from our right. We waited a bit, went on again, and came smack into a traverse. It was pitch dark, but we had no sooner scrambled over than a star-shell burst right overhead. We flung ourselves down, dashed on when the light died, and--well, I hardly know what happened next. All I know is that somehow or other we discovered that we were pressing on the rear of a lot of Huns who were being forced back by our fellows in front, and there was a good chance of our being scuppered by our own bombs. I passed along word to give a yell, and the men shouted like fiends let loose. That was enough for the Huns. Rutlands in front of them, Rutlands behind them! 'Kamerad! Kamerad!' they bawled when I called to them to surrender; and to make a long story short, we scooped the lot and got safe through with a few trifling casualties."

"What beats me," said Adams, "is how Burton managed to deal with three armed Germans single-handed. How was it, Burton?"

Now Burton was never very ready to talk about himself. He flicked the ash off his cigarette, and hesitatingly answered--

"Just a bit of luck, Adams."

"Yes, but what?"

"There were only two really."

"Hedley said there were three."

"So there were," said Hedley, "but there was only one upright when I arrived on the scene."

"What about the others, then? Come, Burton!"

"They weren't far away. The fact is, I knocked 'em down, if you must have it."

"Both at once? Right, left--that way?"

"No, one after the other. You see, the captain gave me an opening, and I took it, that's all."

The company were not satisfied with this far from lucid explanation, and pressed Burton with questions until the details were dragged out of him. He had to endure a flood of congratulations, until a diversion by Captain Adams, who had been meditating a tit-for-tat for Burton's "chipping" on the occasion of his visit to the battery, brought welcome relief.

"Well," said the captain, slowly unfolding a copy of the *Times*, "Burton has been gassing a good deal, but what does it all amount to? The official account won't shock his modesty. Listen! 'Last night we captured certain elements of the enemy's first and second lines of trenches in the neighbourhood of ----, and are now consolidating our gains!'"

THE END

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